



Talking about writing: A case study of a doctoral learning community

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Abstract

This thesis reports a study of a group of international doctoral students in New Zealand who were brought together to develop a learning community. The intention of the community was to help students to work collaboratively as well as individually to identify the challenges they face in academic writing and to evolve strategies to overcome them. The research project investigated how students developed agency through participation in the community. It also examined the concerns the participants had with their academic writing and what they found most useful in the discussion in the community.

Many doctoral students struggle with the formalities and focused rigour of academic writing. International students at western universities have the added obstacle in that they are writing in a second language. It is a common trend in western universities to attract and enrol growing numbers of international students and in many cases; these students constitute a significant source of revenue. Consequently, the problems international students face in mastering academic writing are a concern for universities globally as they are for those in New Zealand.

In this project, the student participants came from a number of different faculties, particularly Education, Arts, Science and Engineering. There were two experienced facilitators who joined the group online.

A participatory action research (PAR) approach was selected for this study as it allows planning and action to evolve as a result of critical reflection on each stage of the project. The learning community evolved over time according to the needs, initiatives and critical insights of the participants. The participatory aspect of PAR was important to this study as it was important for the participants to be actively involved in shaping the direction of discussions within the community and for the findings to honestly reflect their experiences and perceptions.

The study draws on three principal fields of knowledge and theorisation. The first is the large body of literature that discusses the difficulties that students have with academic writing. The second is the growing body of literature that deals with the development and operation of learning communities. The third is the body of studies that explore the concept of agency.

Participants identified a range of personal difficulties in academic writing, ranging from specific problems with vocabulary and grammar to less specific feelings about ‘not doing it right’ or ‘being too simple’. Over successive meetings, participants became more confident in talking about their difficulties and more critically insightful about what was expected of them

and what their actual problems were. They also became more collaborative in sharing strategies that they found useful, in brainstorming alternatives, and in positively critiquing one another's ideas and writing.

In the final interviews each participant shared what they learned through working in the community. A common response was increase in confidence through realisation that they were not alone in experiencing problems and could seek and find useful support from others. Several participants identified particular features that they now understood better and could work with more effectively. Some stated that they had not expected to learn anything new (having joined to support others) but found they had incrementally, and almost unconsciously, gained new insights into their methodology and their findings. Several students stated that they most valued the opportunity to talk to others including professors (who were not their supervisors) about their ideas and how to express them.

The thesis finally identifies key factors, arising from the research, that contribute to the effective functioning of a learning community and makes recommendations for ways within universities to support international students in developing their academic writing.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my role model and hero, my father, Professor Mohsen Hosseini, and to all my being, my mother, Azadeh Salahi.



I also would like to dedicate my thesis to the darling of my heart, my brother, Ali Hosseini.

You are all I think of day and night

More important than life

You are LOVE

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Disclaimer

I hereby state that this research is conducted and written by me and that to the best of my awareness and belief, it contains no material that has been previously published by another writer except where due reference is made. This thesis has not been accepted for the qualification of any other degree or diploma of any educational institution.

Signed:

Dated:

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Chapter One: Introduction

This thesis reports a project in which a learning community was developed to help international doctoral students improve their academic writing. The study investigated how students identified their problems in academic writing and how they developed strategies to overcome them. It explored how participants in the group helped each other and how they variously developed agency in improving their writing. I took a participatory action research approach to investigating the learning community. The guiding research question was:

How can a learning community help international doctoral students to exercise agency and utilise peer support in order to identify their academic writing difficulties and develop strategies to overcome them?

In this chapter, I briefly outline the rationale for the study, my investigative approach, and my own positionality within the study. I then define the key terms and outline the chapters in the thesis.

Rationale for the study

There are several reasons for the study which include: the increasing numbers of international doctoral candidates in western universities, the reported difficulty of international students with academic writing, the importance of the written thesis, the need to explore processes for improving writing as well as problem identification, and the need to explore what students themselves see as the challenges they face in developing their writing. Each of these factors is further discussed in this chapter.

Further, I am motivated by my own position as an international student who wants to improve his academic writing.

Increasing numbers of international doctoral candidates in western universities

In recent years, the number of international students undertaking higher education has risen in many western countries. Because this study is based in New Zealand, I will discuss the situation in English speaking countries in particular. For example, statistics show that the number of international university enrolments in Canada doubled from 66,000 in 2004/5 to 124,000 in 2013/14 (Statistics Canada, 2016). New Zealand has seen the same trend for PhD students, with a 9.8% increase from 2017 in comparison to 2018, of which 35% were postgraduate and research students (The PIE News team, 2020). The same trend has followed in other English

speaking countries like the US, UK and Australia. It has to be noted, however, that due to COVID-19, there has been a drop in international student enrolments (Gerritsen, 2020).

As David (2009) states, the increase in the number of students from different countries has made universities more international. A number of researchers have reflected on the increase in the number of students in postgraduate stages, and highlighted the importance of English academic writing as an international language for research (Green & Myatt, 2011; Hyland, 2013; Luxon & Peelo, 2009; Saltmarsh & Swirski, 2010). As students move to higher degrees, the importance of developing academic writing skills increases, as does the need to write in ways appropriate to their own discipline (Bronson, 2004; English, 2006; Singh, 2016; Thomas, 2005; Wasley, 2008).

Lane and Kinser (2011) emphasised the significance of English as a lingua franca and the third most spoken language in the world. As Al Badi (2015) stated, the use of English is especially challenging for second language speakers, as it is not a skill that can be achieved easily. Similarly, other researchers have acknowledged that while being accepted into PhD programmes signals academic ability, various studies have reflected that international postgraduate students have found academic writing challenging (Brown, 2008; Chou, 2011; Singh, 2019). Guerin et al. (2013) argued that students need to get trusted feedback in a safe and confidential environment from respected individuals in order to grow and improve educationally. This study aimed to provide a case study of giving feedback on students' academic writing difficulties in a trusted environment in the form of a learning community.

International students' difficulties with academic writing

Björk and Räisänen (1997) consider writing as a tool for thinking and language development and argue its importance in all disciplines. However, as Lea and Street (1998) state, the ability to write does not mean that one is a writer. The importance of academic writing, as Al Badi (2015) reflected, is not just as a tool to master English, but also to learn in an English medium discipline. A report by Higher Education Funding Council for England (2010) on doctoral students suggested that a majority took more time to finish their study than was required by the university and the main reason they reported was difficulty with writing. Odena and Burgess (2017) stated that improving academic writing is useful and necessary for conducting research and for employment, as well as the written thesis document itself.

For postgraduate students, academic writing is an important part of their journey. Students may be from different fields of study, but when it comes to research studies they have to report their

findings through academic writing. The style of academic writing in different fields varies according to differing sets of rules, making it more challenging when it comes to writing a thesis as Singh (2016) reflected. Parker (2009) argued that the basic outline of a thesis is not simple; rather it is discussed through feedback between the supervisor and the student. Catterall et al. (2011) explained that the need for discussions about appropriate writing style becomes increasingly significant as the number of students rise and duration of study decreases while supervisors are being still pressured to publish.

Many researchers have investigated the writing difficulties that students face and have made different suggestions that I further discuss in detail in Chapter Three. However, Wyatt-Smith and Jackson (2016) argue that recently the number of studies on writing has fallen and more studies have been devoted to reading. There have also been different views on the source of academic writing difficulties. Bitchener and Basturkmen's (2006) study on international postgraduate students found that lack of a shared perception of the nature of academic writing was a source of students' academic writing difficulty. On the other hand, Tahaine (2010) and Tanaka (2002) found the source of difficulties to be lack of academic study skills. Further, Mackenzie et al. (2015) emphasise the importance of finding the elements that lead to a better students' understanding of writing, teaching of writing, and assessing writing.

Challenges students face in developing their writing

Academic writing is considered a complicated process. Studies have examined students' writing difficulties from a broad range of perspectives (Al Badi, 2015; Leisak, 1989; Miller, 1994). For example, Miller (1994) had focused on vocabulary, Al Badi (2015) focused on logical paragraphs and Leisak (1989) focused on grammar problems.

Second language students, as Van Lier (2006) and Livingstone et al. (2011) stated, will inevitably make mistakes and errors in their second language use. Casanave (2004) and Soe (2003) reported that irrespective of their language or educational background, postgraduate students are not always aware of their academic writing requirements and argued that these need to be more explicitly informed. As Ballard and Clanchy (1997) reflected, students' struggles in finding forms, conventions, and expectations to address writing issues could prove demotivating to their writing.

Norton and Norton (2001) stated that one of the ways that students can learn and improve their writing is through immersion. However, as Mertler (2009) and Stiggins (1999) reported, many teachers indicated that they did not feel fully prepared to evaluate learners' writing. As Paré et

al. (2009) found, explaining academic writing is considered to be linguistically and rhetorically complicated. Bruton (2009) reflected that supervisors have their own methods and views on dealing with mistakes and giving feedback, while students also have their own perceptions of what they feel needs to be corrected. He argued that if an understanding is not established between the supervisor and the student, errors continue to occur and both could become frustrated.

As Horwitz (2007), Kern (1995), and Schulz (1996) argued, mismatches between students' and professors' perceptions of writing difficulties can lead to unsatisfying results in language learning and usage, whereas understanding of the differing perceptions can lead to more effective supervision. Familiarity with students' writing needs could benefit supervisors and enable them to give more practical feedback.

Catterall et al. (2011) stated that this complex process of developing academic writing has caused universities to become tardy in responding to this issue although, as Badenhorst et al. (2015) illustrated, universities and institutions have tried to address students' writing issues by offering extra writing courses and workshops. However, students continue to have writing problems that need understanding, and further ways of addressing them need exploring.

My own position as an international student

As is expected in participatory action research, I was an active participant in the study. As Schon (1987) stated, practical actions of individuals and groups in action research are investigated critically, therefore the researcher's own performance has to be critically self-reflective. Kemmis (2008) reflected that action research needs people that are close to the studied area to play an internal role.

I am an Iranian for whom English is a second language. However, I spent several years of my schooling in Scotland where my father held an academic position, and so I am fluent in spoken English. I have found, however, that verbal fluency in English, does not guarantee correctness in academic writing style.

I, like the other participants, am an international postgraduate student and share concerns in relation to academic writing. I had also been using academic writing for my research and have faced difficulties. Thus, while I was the researcher, I did not position myself as having expertise in academic writing. As is explained in Chapter Two, two experienced academics were brought into the study online to act as facilitators of the group. Within the group, I was a learner like

the others. Further, as I am an English language teacher and pursuing a PhD degree in Education, understanding academic writing difficulties, as an insider, would help not only with my own understanding of writing but also with teaching in the future.

Overall, my role in the project had three aspects: the researcher, participant, and co-facilitator of the group sessions. As Given (2008) argued, a researcher's participatory involvement in a study can help assure that the developed knowledge incorporates the aims of the research. My involvement as a participant in the process allowed me to experience the dynamics of the group processes and helped me gain better understanding of my own writing difficulties and of strategies to overcome them. I wanted to find out more about postgraduate students' writing difficulties, about how much is shared, and what is done to overcome those difficulties. Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) acknowledge that the role of a researcher in participatory action research is complex and need not be neutral, as they can usefully engage as an equal partner in the inquiry. While I did contribute as a participant, I did retain a relatively neutral role within the group and I concentrated on the research process. Because the group facilitators joined the project online, as detailed in Chapter Two, I also take the role of a co-facilitator to help organisation and to overcome some of the difficulties that arose because of distance.

Why a learning community?

Bandura (2006) has argued that as a result of changing trends in teaching-learning communications, students have become, to greater or lesser extents, agents of their own learning. Joo et al. (2000) suggested that as students take more control over their learning those who have higher agency can learn better. Bandura (2000) had earlier argued that continuous innovation is needed to address changes in education and society, to encourage students' agentic adaptability, and to further their success. These arguments prompted my desire to investigate the potential of the learning community to develop participants' agency and to examine changes, prompted by interaction between members of the community, in understandings.

In postgraduate studies, as Smith (2003) reflected, learning is different, as students do not learn from an instructor who has a central role and instead they take this central role by studying independently. Having this in mind, I intended to set up a group with the aim of developing a learning community that would give students a central role. The learning community would allow me as the researcher and participant to observe and interpret from an insider perspective. Moreover, the learning community would allow the participants to challenge and support each

other, making such interactions a critical part of the research. Further, a learning community would allow participants to discuss issues regarding their academic writing with criticality, in a situation that was to the side of their formal presentations of their research studies.

Participants' engagement in problem solving, as Saunders and Werner (2002) acknowledged, could establish new friendships through their collaboration. Establishment of new relationships could help in personal, academic, and professional fields. The value of such relationships could be considerable: Dodge and Kendall (2004) reflected that PhD students may not throughout their studies get the chance to develop connections. Guerin et al. (2013) and other researchers also argued that the PhD journey is often a lonely, solitary and isolated process which indicates the need for bringing students together (Aitchison & Lee, 2006; Boud & Lee, 2005; Ferguson, 2009; Lee & Boud, 2003).

Another effect of participating in learning communities, as Salisbury-Glennon et al. (2001) reflected, is increase in motivation and of self-regulation skills. Tinto (1997) also argued that participating in learning communities enables people to become more active in their academic and social lives. Guerin et al. (2013) argued that the challenges discussed within learning communities are not limited to language but also impact on attitudes and behaviours that might foster other methods of thinking and be of particular significance for international students living alone and in other countries.

A learning community, as Klein (2000) and Smith and MacGregor (1991) have acknowledged, can provide the chance for participants from a variety of disciplines to learn from each other while connecting ideas and to develop their identity and voice through social interactions that focus on academic content. Dodge and Kendall (2004) argued that participating in a learning community helps students learn to apply concepts in one subject to projects in other subjects. They suggested that finding connection between subjects helps discover connection between different forms of knowledge. The learning community may thus allow the integration of learning, skills, and assignments from various disciplines in a logical manner. A number of researchers (Cabrera et al., 1998; Wenger, 2011; Whitt et al., 2001) have suggested that learning communities also encourage tolerance of differing social behaviours and promote criticality and personal and interpersonal development. They suggest these qualities promote academic development and performance. Hod (2017) argued that learning communities are particularly useful in universities in the educational sector.

Yang and Williamson (2011) noted that while there has been broad and intense advocacy in both theory and literature of learning communities, there has been a lack of study of practical approaches and processes. Therefore, in this study, I wanted to record and discuss a practical approach. I have taken a participatory action research approach to studying the learning community in my project in order to track developments and interactions.

Participatory action research as an investigative process

Action research questions the status quo and pursues change through research. In terms expressed by Glassman et al. (2013), in a learning community action research creates a place for interaction towards a nominated goal. They conceptualise a learning community as an ongoing group engagement to creatively change community patterns of behaviour and initiate collaborative decision-making, which would lead to collective action and new possibilities. At the same time, the group would continue evaluation of actions and refinement of plans for further actions and improvement.

This study was interested in understanding students' perspective towards academic writing. Therefore, a process that actively engaged participants and focused on a shared problem was needed: in this case, the focus was on academic writing. In this action research process, as Kemmis et al. (2013) and Kemmis et al. (2014) have explained, I anticipated a cyclic method that proceeded through planning, acting and observing, reflecting, re-planning, and so on. This, as Cardno (2003) indicated, would allow participants to discuss, plan, and share their writing difficulties and strategies through the study and improve practice. Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) emphasised that the cyclic process is not a fixed structure, but rather a simplification of the planning, action, and reflexivity that takes place. The account that follows in the thesis discusses the ways that the elements of participation, action, and research evolved.

Action research is compatible with a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology focuses on people's own perceptions of their lived experiences. Action research actively engaged participants in investigating their concerns with academic writing and in working on improvement. The outcomes of those processes are reported in terms of the perceptions of the participants. My own reflections on the project as a whole are also based on my perceptions, even though those perceptions were shaped through carefully listening to the other participants' perceptions and critically reading the literature as well as by my own experience. Accordingly, I present a report of the process through a collage of narratives of participant's experiences and views.

Location of the study: New Zealand, a *western* university.

The study was conducted in New Zealand, an English speaking country with a western educational system and culture. In a global world, every country is east of somewhere and west of somewhere else: I use the terms western as it is used by scholars (such as Said, 1978; Spivak, 1996) who use it to refer to Anglo and European power-holding countries. According to Ministry of Education (2020b), New Zealand has eight state funded universities that offer a large variety of subjects and provide specialised professional degrees. Further, all New Zealand universities are internationally recognised and work with many universities around the world.

Greenwood et al. (2014) reflected that New Zealand universities pursue a policy of internationalising their universities and increasing the number of international students. In this regard, Greenwood (2020) states that although there are students from other English speaking countries in New Zealand, the majority of international students are second language speakers of English. They face the challenge of not only improving their English but also mastering the complexities of academic writing.

The Ministry of Education (2020a) has shown interest in action research in New Zealand and is planning to do more research in the next decade. The Ministry considers action research to be helpful in evidence-based planning that may improve student achievement. As Heng and Abdullah (2006) have stated, research on postgraduate students' L2 writing in countries other than USA, Australia, Canada, and the UK is relatively rare. It is therefore timely to explore further the context of New Zealand.

International students in comparison to native speakers tend to face more writing difficulties, as they have to write in a second language. Due to an increase in numbers and corresponding increases in income from such students, it is important for universities to consider how international students' English language proficiency and academic writing can be improved. This foregrounds the importance of English language proficiency, especially for postgraduate students, as it is the main tool of learning and success.

Having English language proficiency is important, as Romanoski et al. (2005) explained that a certain level of English ability is needed in order to achieve academic success in an English medium context. In order for students of non-English backgrounds to enter New Zealand universities, for postgraduate study they have to demonstrate their competence in the English language. This is done by either arriving with the specified score in IELTS or TOEFL; or by going through university based language classes and passing their assessments. This process

of assessed competence is enough to allow entry to a course of study. However, arguably there is need for continuing support for students to improve their academic writing in English after entry. Most New Zealand universities provide a study skills centre that offers one-to-one mentoring. Some individual doctoral supervisors develop group learning opportunities, of various kinds, for their students. My prospective supervisor had written about doctoral learning communities. This led me to plan this study.

The western classroom requires the students to have full participation in the classroom and as Herrera et al. (2012) reflected, use their “cognitive development, academic knowledge, and language skills to read, comprehend, synthesise, analyse, compare, contrast, relate, articulate, write, evaluate and more”. In postgraduate studies, however, as Smith (2003) has explained, the system of teaching and learning changes: learning is expected to occur more independently.

Key terms

This section of the chapter focuses on key concepts within this study: agency, academic writing, and learning community.

Concept of agency

In this thesis, I use agency to denote the process of actively taking responsibility. In this case, it involves postgraduate students taking responsibility for examining their academic writing and their willingness to overcome their writing difficulties. This concept particularly draws on Bandura (2006) who viewed agency as having free will and control of thoughts and actions. Synofzik et al. (2008) stated that agency starts with a person’s own actions. Therefore, as various scholars have reflected, agency is in relation to the sense of being in control, causing or initiating one’s own action (Gallagher, 2000; Haggard & Chambon, 2012; Yoon, 2011). Bandura (1997) explained that free control over one’s own actions allows a two-way relationship between the participants and their environment to develop. In planning my study, I hoped that the participants would be able to take responsibility for improving their writing.

Academic writing

The main focus of the study is on how participants explored academic writing within the learning community. A simple, although circular, definition, of academic writing, might be the style of writing that is acceptable within the academy. Rather than giving definitions, many theorists emphasise aspects of academic writing. Some of these follow.

Arkoudis and Tran (2007) argued that academic writing is a necessity for academic success especially for international students and that the many aspects of academic writing make it a complex process. Al Fadda (2012) stated that writing is a result of mind activity, which encompasses mental and cognitive abilities that reflect the voice of the writer. Rose (1985) emphasised that writing academically involves total and active engagement with the principles of a discipline.

Matsuda and Silva (2005) argued that a complex relationship exists between writing and writers, readers, text, and reality. This indicates that there are different factors that influence students' academic writing decisions. Some of these factors, as Prior (1995), Johns (1997), Newman et al. (2003), and Swales (1990) have reported, include intention, academic and cultural context, stance, discipline, and, values and expectations. Aitchison and Lee (2006), Carter (2007), Bruce (2008), and Stracke (2010) also reflected that the different approaches and teaching styles in different disciplines also influence academic writing.

Although I began this study with a relatively narrow view of what academic writing entails, my reading and my experience in the learning community have led me to recognise the complexity of the many skills involved.

Learning community

Greenwood (2020) defined a learning community as a group that comes together with the explicit intention of learning with and from each other. The study gathered a group of international postgraduate students to improve their academic writing by coming together in the form of a learning community. Wenger (1998) and Lave and Wenger (1991) noted that there were various terms for the act of getting people together in the form of a group to learn mutually through shared activities, observation, and the development over time of a purpose. The term I use in this study is learning community.

The students who took part in the study were all postgraduate students who had some understanding of academic contexts and needs. Drawing on Gee (1996), who reflected that students do not enter university with blank minds but rather with social experience and affiliation, I assumed that those who decided to take part in a learning community would be active members who had an interest in sharing their ideas and that they would take responsibility for their learning. Noble and Henderson (2008) argued that learning communities need active learners who feel responsible for their learning and the way it takes place. Hord

(2009) argued that learning would take place in a learning community if members focused on a shared purpose with integrity and truthfulness.

In the study, I tried to involve PhD level students who might tend to see themselves as individual learners in a learning community. However, getting people together in a group is not enough and, in line with Ozturk (2009), I tried to establish a feeling of belonging among participants to promote effective participation.

Outline of chapters

This first chapter, the introduction, has begun with stating the research question followed by the rationale for the study. The rationale includes the increase in the number of international postgraduate students, challenges they face in developing their writing, and my own desire, as an international doctoral student, to improve my writing. The chapter offered an initial overview of challenges international students face in writing, the potential of learning communities, and the process of participatory action research. It then explained the location of the study. It finished with briefly discussing the key terms of the study.

In the second chapter, the methodology of the research is presented. It specifies and justifies the methodological design of the research. Further, the participants of the study, their participation, and recruitment are explained. The chapter continues by elaborating on my position within the study and the ethical procedures I followed. It explains the data collection process and progress of the project. Explanation of analysis of data and of decisions about the form of presentation follows. The chapter ends with an explanation on the trustworthiness and limits of the study.

Chapter Three reviews relevant literature. It starts by reviewing studies on a similar topic. It then discusses the writings that inform the theoretical background of the study and research regarding academic writing, the difficulties students face, and strategies that have been suggested. The chapter then examines the literature about agency and its relation to writing. It continues with reviewing literature on learning communities. Next, it reviews work regarding action research and participatory action research.

Reports of the project that was developed to carry out this research are presented in Chapter Four. The chapter is a long one and is in the form of a collage, interweaving narratives of participants' experiences and perceptions with accounts of key selected sessions of the project.

The intention of this collage is to reflect the multiple participant perceptions of what took place and what was useful and /or significant.

The final chapter, Chapter Five, discusses key aspects and the research, and returns to the research question. It concludes by making a number of recommendations and notes my plans for further work and research.

Chapter Two: Methodology

Introduction

This chapter discusses the methodological approach used in the study. The study investigated how the development of a learning community could help international doctoral students identify their difficulties with academic writing and help them develop strategies to address those difficulties. The study aimed to answer the following research question:

How can a learning community help international postgraduate students to exercise agency and utilise peer support in order to identify their academic writing difficulties and develop strategies to improve them?

The overall approach is a qualitative one: it focuses on participants' perceptions and experiences and on how these develop and change over time. It focuses both on participants' awareness of and concerns about their academic writing and on the development of the learning community itself and on how it enabled discussion, support, and action. Participatory action research (PAR) provides a means of engaging with the setting up of the project and its development as well as eliciting on-going and summative feedback from participants.

The next section of this chapter explains the epistemological basis of the research, aligning it with the purposes of the study. It details the rationale for a qualitative, broadly phenomenological, approach and for the selection of participatory action research. The following sections explain: the setting up of the project; the recruitment of participants; my role; the working of the community; the processes of collating data; strategies for analysis; and decisions about reporting the overall findings of the study. Limitations of the project are also discussed.

Qualitative research, phenomenology, (participatory) action research, and case study

The purpose of this study called for a qualitative approach, focusing on participants' experiences, and a design that accommodated change and emergent issues. A qualitative approach has an evolving and interpretive nature, which allowed me to explore participants' evolving views on academic writing, and their choices and decisions in regards to the difficulties of academic writing. It calls for my report to be descriptive, inductive, and naturalistic. Lincoln and Denzin (2003) consider qualitative research as an approach that tries to make meaning and interpretation of various phenomena in regards to the meaning brought to them by people.

An important characteristic of qualitative research is that data collected is from natural settings. Further, qualitative research is descriptive since data collected is in a narrative form, which allows the researcher to search for comprehensive understanding. As Bogdan and Biklen (2007) state, its focus is on the process of how people negotiate meaning. In addition, qualitative research is considered to be inductive as a hypothesis is not tested with the data; rather what is important is understanding the meanings attached by the participants (Ormston et al., 2014).

A focus on the meaning attached to lived experience by participants is a key feature of a phenomenological approach to research (Heidegger, 1962; Tindall, 2009; Van Manen, 2014). This study takes a phenomenological approach in that it prioritises the accounts of the participants and their interpretations of their experiences and of the changes in their awareness and practice. Spiegelberg (2007) explains that there have been many phenomenologists and as a result different schools and styles of phenomenology. The phenomenological approach used in this study follows Van Manen's approach. Van Manen explained that all aspects of a phenomenon should be considered in understanding a study including the role of the researcher in the process. In Van Manen's (2016) view, experience and phenomenon are considered equal. This study follows what Van Manen's (2016) called an evolving approach, which involves questioning, reflecting, and writing.

The nature of the project was also a developmental one. It takes time and commitment for a group to become a learning community. How that community develops depends on what participants bring to the group and how they react to and interact with each other. Such a developmental and emergent process is a key feature of action research (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011). Action research combines investigation with practical action and is widely used as a research method to instigate and study change (Altrichter et al., 1991). Change in the context of this project involved not only the evolution of the learning community but also the changes in the awareness and practice of each of the participants. It was, therefore, important to actively involve the participants in planning, reflecting on, and continuously redirecting the direction of the change.

As the project involved on-going investigation and action by all participants (facilitators of the group as well as postgraduate students in the group), it was described in terms of participatory action research. It was participatory because participants were actively engaged in investigation as well as action. In this way, the approach relied on facilitating participants' critical reflections

about errors and problems they identified in their academic writing and about the strategies they planned and utilised for the improvement of their writing.

Given (2008) defines action research as a flexible research methodology that pursues change and study which in its form, has overlapping cycles of research and planning. A typical cycle of investigation includes four steps. First, researching the current situation and planning change, second, introducing changes and trying new practices that would lead to improvement, third, observing the effect of change and collecting data, and fourth analysing the data collected to develop actionable knowledge. Altrichter et al. (1991) state that the cyclic process continues as participants incrementally develop more awareness of their goals and the strategies needed to achieve them. The results gained from action research can be used both in the practical and theoretical sense. It can thus be argued that action research becomes participatory in relation to the degree of engagement by the participants in the research.

In Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) view, participatory action research has a progressive and cyclic process of self-reflection that leads to further action. Through participatory action research, the initial plans made are superseded when participants start to learn from their experience. Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) takes place through the process itself. Therefore, participatory action research studies actual practices in real contexts, rather than abstract or generalised ideas. This focus on practice and context was in line with the aim of the current study, which was to study the writing difficulties students had and the strategies they came up with and to find those that were of use. In addition, the study aimed to investigate the ways students developed and expressed self-efficacy and agency through the process of sharing in the learning community. Further, the study intended to track how the learning community itself functioned. All of these aims involved investigation of the on-going process of the project and the collaboration of the participants.

Reflection plays an important role within the participatory action research process. In this study, participants not only reflected on their own understanding of academic writing and difficulties, but they also reflected on the understanding and views of other participants and the facilitators. The participants continuously set goals and refined them throughout the study, and interpreted, defined, and then refined their strategies and understandings of academic writing. The commonality they shared was researching one's own practice, making change and reflecting on one's own work, and sharing which they would have found to be useful for themselves and others.

Another important goal of participatory action research that Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) refer to is the development of communicative space. Communicative space, they explain, involves the creation of circumstances “in which people can search together collaboratively for more comprehensible, true, authentic, and morally right and appropriate ways of understanding and acting in the world” (p. 578). The outcome from this approach is tangible whether it goes according to plan or not. The concept of communicative space allowed me to place myself within the context and gain a more vivid understanding. The development of that space allowed the group to change into a learning community.

Greenwood (2020) emphasises the difference between a community of practice and a learning community. A community of practice as defined by Wenger (1998) is a common domain where a group of people who have common interests gather. Participants of a community of practice share consciously and unconsciously their knowledge and understandings, while having their own opinions and insights and they induct and acculturate new members (Wenger, 1998). In a way, the postgraduate students already belonged to a community of practice: they shared academic goals and consciously and unconsciously passed on a common body of opinion and knowledge. Greenwood (2020) argues that “the process of transforming a community of practice into a learning community involves deliberate intention to learn, continuing, though not necessarily constant, engagement, the development of trust, processes that foster dialogue and that serve to both critique and encourage, and risk-taking.” Participatory action research enables a collaborative way of investigating such transformation.

It may also be useful to consider this study in terms of the case study literature. Stake (2006) defines a case study as an approach that tries to study deeply either one or more instances of a phenomenon. Case studies can extend from being a tool in a scientific research area, to being a pedagogical strategy in an educational learning process. Creswell (2007) explains that the case study involves exploring a situation and practice over time with the use of various tools, such as observation or interviews, to gather data in order to develop a deep understanding of the issue studied. Within the overarching case studied, each participants’ experiences was considered an embedded case (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Stake, 2006).

In participatory action research, everyone actively involved in a project are considered participants and are also co-researchers of their practice (Brydon-Miller et al., 2011; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; Zuber-Skerritt, 1992). Thus, all those in the learning community under study, including the facilitator and myself were participants, and within the learning

community, we were co-researchers of changes in understandings and practice. Zuber-Skerritt (2001) talks about this collaboration in terms of action learning. In addition, it was my task, as the researcher who investigated the overall process and effect of the learning community to observe, record, and analyse the workings of the learning community and to collate the shared narratives of individual participants. In this way, there was an informal level of action research/action learning carried out by each of the participants, alongside a further formal level of research carried out by me as my doctoral study. At this formal level, I actively sought to be participatory by ensuring that participants could bring whatever they wanted to the group sessions and so shape the direction of discussions in the community. I also prioritised their voices and their experiences in reporting the project.

Participants, their recruitment, and their roles

The participants in the project had a range of different roles and comprised two groups. One group consisted of international doctoral students who were interested in improving their academic writing. The other group consisted of two professors who acted as facilitators of the group. I constituted a further, different, unit in that I combined a number of roles: I was the formal researcher; I interacted directly with the facilitators in critically reflecting on progress and planning further sessions; and I was also an international doctoral student who wanted to improve my academic writing. Each of these groups of participants is discussed in further detail below. Their contribution to the learning community and their engagement in participatory research are discussed in chapters that follow.

Following examples of other action research studies (Alam, 2016; Greenwood, 2009) I sought to recruit about eight to twelve student participants, as I considered that would create a group large enough for discussion but still small enough to allow everyone to have a voice. These students were to be international postgraduate thesis students who wanted to improve their academic writing. They could have different genders, age, language backgrounds, language experience, countries, fields of study, study experience, and be at various stages of study. I decided to initially place no limit on participation, as I thought some who volunteered might drop out early in the process. I used a snowballing process to recruit student participants.

Following what was approved by the university ethics committee, I sent an email notice of the project to the postgraduate co-ordinators in the whole university and asked them to send it to all their postgraduate students. All but one of the postgraduate co-ordinators agreed and sent my email to their students. Those who responded to the invitation were sent an email with an

information sheet about the project. After receiving the information sheet and confirming their participation, I sent the responders a consent form to fill and send back. Those who decided to participate were asked to further notify their colleagues who might be interested in the study and explain to them the purpose of the learning community.

In addition to sending emails, I talked about my project widely to get participants for my study. A community that I had more access to was the Iranian community in which there were many postgraduate students all of whom had English as their second language. For this purpose, I decided to take part in different gatherings and notify them of my research study. I asked for the emails of those who showed interest and sent them the information sheet to further clarify the study to them, and also the consent form to sign and send back. There were also other Iranians who were friends and when I informed them about my study, they showed interest and decided to participate.

At the end, most of the participants who decided to join the study were Iranians who, I suspect, wanted to help a country mate in his study. In addition, there were students from a number of other countries. English was a second language for all of them. About half came from a field in the Humanities, especially from Education, which is my college. Others came from the Science, especially Chemistry, as this is a field of study for many Iranians.

Because of delays in gaining ethical approval, I only had time for an introductory meeting with volunteer research participants before I travelled to an overseas conference. At the introductory session, there were second language postgraduate students and one native speaker who later decided to drop out. After my return in October, several of the initial volunteer research participants found they had other commitments and several new people came. The students who took part in the project are detailed in Table 2.1. All have been given pseudonyms.

The next group of participants are the facilitators. My position as an international postgraduate student who wanted to improve my academic writing did not in itself prevent me from facilitating the group: we could have shared insights and experiences. Rather I was aware from the start that I did not have the expertise to be an effective facilitator, though I hoped to gain further knowledge through the project. In addition, I considered it would be easier to be the observer and record-keeper if someone at least shared facilitation with me. I, therefore, asked Professors Jess and Kate to facilitate the group. I was mindful that their academic expertise would ensure some reciprocity in the research: the students would potentially benefit from their experience rather than just being the subjects of my research. Smith (2012) and Kemmis and

McTaggart (2005) emphasise the importance of reciprocity in research. Both professors had experience in developing and facilitating learning communities and both had supervised a considerable number of international doctoral students. In addition, both had written about participatory action research and about academic literacy.

That there were two facilitators was partly a consequence of concerns expressed by the university ethics committee, which I will discuss later in this chapter. However, the involvement of two people in this role had other benefits. One was that no one person was in control of the group. Brydon-Miller et al. (2011) empathised that power is always involved in social interactions and that the identification and analysis of the flows of power in interactions is an important aspect of research. Having two facilitators meant that they would occasionally take different positions on issues and that could encourage the students to also do so. Furthermore, they would critically reflect on the process and deconstruct issues of power and influence if they arose. That they were academic colleagues who had worked together previously (although one was in New Zealand and the other in Australia) was a circumstance that made it easy for them to collaborate. A further benefit was that the sessions were not disrupted if one of them had other academic commitments; when one could not participate, the other was there and the learning community did not have to make sacrifices. Their direct debriefs (involving me) and their written reflections ensured there was continuity in the project.

It was always expected that Professor Kate, who was in Australia, would participate through an online platform. However, delays in starting the project meant that Professor Jess was also away from campus for much of the time. Therefore, both facilitators mainly participated online, apart from the longer workshop that was the eighth session for which they were both physically present. As will be discussed later in the thesis, online participation did create some initial problems in getting to know each other, but they seemed to become resolved as the project progressed. Details of the facilitators are also provided in Table 2.1. Both have been given pseudonyms.

My own role is discussed in further detail in a following section of this chapter. I use my own name in the table below and throughout the thesis.

Pseudonym	Field of study	Attendance	Sessions attended	Stage of study
<i>Students</i>				
Majid	Biomedical Engineering	4	4-5-9-11	Finished
Amin	Chemistry	1	1	End
Ehsan	English Literature	2	2-4	Middle of Bachelor (Already had PhD)
Farzaneh	French Literature	5	1-2-8-9-11	End of 1 st beginning of 2 nd year
Flora	Chemistry	1	4	1 st year
Jane	Teacher Education	1	2	End of 1 st beginning of 2 nd year
Mona	Human development	6	1-2-3-9-10-11	End of 1 st beginning of 2 nd year
Maria	Chemistry	8	1-2-3-4-5-6-7-9	Middle of 2 nd year
Lenzy	Biology	2	1-2	Beginning of 2 nd
Nima	Chemistry	3	4-5-6	Middle of 2 nd year
Angy	Teacher Education	5	1-3-4-5-7	2 nd year
Ahmad	Teacher Education	9	2-3-4-5-6-7-8-10-11	3 rd year
Diba	Teacher Education	3	1-3-4	Submitted
Vida	Chemistry	3	2-6-7	End of 1 st beginning of 2 nd year
Sima	Teacher Education	1	4	3 rd year
<i>Researcher (and student)</i>				
Mir	Teacher Education	11	1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-10-11	Middle of 2 nd year
<i>Facilitators</i>				
Jess	Teacher Education Range of international	9	1-2-4-5-6-7-8-9-11	

	doctoral students & experience in developing learning communities			
Kate	Teacher Education Specialisation in language and literacies.	10	1-2-3-5-6-7-8-9-10-11	

Table 2. 1: Participants in the project.

My position

My role as formal researcher was initially to observe, interview, analyse and report. As is expected in participatory action research, I was also a participant in the learning community. Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) and Smith (2015) emphasise the importance of the researcher being willing to contribute as an equal participant in participatory research.

As the project unfolded, my role became three-fold. The position I had within the study was a researcher, who was studying the process as a whole as well as students' perceptions of their academic writing and their development of self-efficacy, and agency. In addition, I was a participant who shared similar concerns to those of the other students, being an international postgraduate student myself. Moreover, I became a co-facilitator as the main facilitators were not physically present and I needed to facilitate aspects of the meetings as well as share debriefing reflections with the two professors.

During the sessions, my role was to record proceedings as well as to engage with the discussions. Further, I would observe all the participants to gauge their understandings and feelings towards what was being discussed. As the facilitators could not clearly see everyone to read their faces, I had to assist the facilitators with the information that I was getting. One of the examples of this was towards the end of the study, when I felt that the participants were not so willing to continue the learning community and would ask me questions before or after the sessions that indicated their feelings. I was then able to transfer these to the facilitators and in the talks with them make a better decision.

The third role that I had in the learning community was being a participant of the study. The aim of the learning community was to study international postgraduate students' academic writing difficulties. I, like all the other participants, am an international student who was doing

his postgraduate degree and I too had difficulties with my academic writing. However, I had some constraints, which was that, as I was the researcher and this was my study, I did not feel I could not share my ideas and strategies as much as the other participants; before or after the sessions therefore I felt I had to remain silent as much as possible and listen to others share. However, there were times that I also shared my problems as well as the strategies that I thought could be helpful to others. By sharing the writing difficulties I had with others, I tried to make them understand that I, like them, had writing difficulties and was not immune, and the fact that I did not talk so much was because of my role as the researcher, whose main objective was to record the process.

Ethical procedure

I sought and gained approval for the study from the Educational Research Human Ethics Committee (ERHEC) of the University of Canterbury. This was not an unproblematic process. It is discussed further in Chapter Four as a first stage in the project, and I acknowledge it briefly here. The process of getting ethics took nearly five months and might be seen as the first cycle of action research in that it slightly changed the initially planned design.

Problems arose when the committee asked me to clearly quantify the time that would be spent in group sessions and to clearly specify what information the participants would be expected to provide. As a novice researcher, I initially found it challenging to explain the emergent nature of participatory action research. Another significant problem was the involvement of my supervisor in the research. First, I intended to study a learning community that she would set up, aid, and lead but the ethics committee would not approve that plan because of what they saw as problematic power relations. Then I changed the plan to involving as a facilitator Professor Kate, who was a complete outsider and who came into the project at the request of my supervisor. That decision allowed the project to begin but it also meant that I would need to set up a potential learning community instead of researching one that occurred more naturally. It also meant that I needed to plan for and set up online facilitation. One positive outcome of the online connection was that Zoom, the platform we used, had a recording function that simplified the recording of each session. Once Professor Kate signed the appropriate letters of consent, the ethics committee agreed that Professor Jess, my supervisor, could join the sessions as an auxiliary facilitator.

Other expectations from the ethics committee were more easily met. I obtained informed consent from the participants. I clearly informed participants that the group was not a

replacement for the academic skills centre or their supervisors and that they would not receive any advice on the content of their research. I could not promise complete anonymity or confidentiality to the participants because of the open group nature of the process, but I have used pseudonyms for the participants, so they cannot be identified by outside readers. I also provided participants with the drafts of the narratives I constructed in order to allow their feedback.

In addition to the formal requirements of the committee, I have tried to remain very committed to hearing and reporting the voices, and as much as possible the meanings, of the participants. As a researcher, I also have a voice and I realise I am not a neutral recorder. It is repeatedly acknowledged that in most forms of participatory research the researcher role is not a neutral one (Bergold & Thomas, 2012; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; Noble & Henderson, 2008). The researcher not only needs to acknowledge and critique his or her own positionality and to critically reflect on his or her role in discussions but also needs to be part of the discussions and the research process as a whole. In the words of Bergold and Thomas (2012), “objectivity and neutrality must be replaced by reflective subjectivity”.

Data collection

A primary source of data was the recording of the sessions. All but the face-to-face workshop - the eighth session - were recorded through the use of Zoom. To ensure no data was lost I also audio-recorded each session on my mobile phone. The workshop took place with both facilitators present in person, and it was tape-recorded only. All sessions were transcribed.

Each session was followed by a reflective debrief between the facilitators and me. This was also recorded and transcribed. In addition, each of the facilitators and I wrote personal critical reflections on each session. We shared the written reflections. After one session, we agreed to send our written reflections to all the student participants as a model of the kinds of things they themselves might write as reflections if they wished. A few student participants did share their reflections.

Between sessions, some email correspondence occurred. For example, in one session the participants decided to share websites and other sources that could help with aspects of academic writing. They emailed me suggestions and I then distributed them to everyone. It was further suggested that a forum should be established on the university learn website. To this end, I contacted the university learn website and set an appointment to discuss my needs with them. Having explained the forum and its purpose, the person in charge at the university

received approval to set up the forum and added all my participants to the forum. I then informed the participants and facilitators of its existence and its purpose. However, it was only used once to share samples of writing.

Some participants brought samples of their writing to the group for discussion.

The final source of data was a sequence of open-ended interviews with all the participants.

The sources of data are summarised in Table 2.2.

Data Sources
Tape recordings of meetings
Tape recordings of debriefs
Written reflections by Mir, Jess, and Kate
Interviews with participants of all meetings at end of programme
Artefacts (journals, drafts of writing)
Emails and forum on university learn website

Table 2. 2: Sources of Data

Progress of project

The meetings of learning took place over nearly a five-month period, from the 23 October 2018 to 26 February 2019. In the middle was the Christmas holiday period, from the end of December to the beginning of January. During the whole data collection period, I would transcribe each session and each interview before the start of the next one. During the holiday, I had the chance to study and evaluate the transcription of the sessions and interviews to find emerging themes and to get a better understanding.

Table 2.3 has specific dates and brief summary of topics that arose in each discussion.

Session	Topics that arose	Date
1 st	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introducing themselves • Aims of the study and its needs • Procrastination • Perfectionism • Writer's block • Academic language • Cultural and language background intervention • Too much writing and reducing words • Not being alone • How to start a new sentence, paragraph, chapter • Consistency in writing (coherence/word choice) 	23/10/2018

2 nd	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informal and not academic language • Repetition of words (clashes/phrases) • Grammar (Not Academic language/words and grammar) • Second language speakers' difficulties • Academic writing expectation (academic writing rules) • Word choice (field vocabulary) • Farzaneh's writing (chronological order/simplification/reorganisation) • Passive and active language 	06/11/2018
3 rd	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need of immediate feedback • Clear writing • Sources of feedback (Soar Advisors) • Maryam's writing (providing evidence/ brackets) • Characteristics of academic writing • Anecdotes and personalising • Personal experience in writing • Different types of writing • Start a forum on LEARN • Clear paragraph and statement and punctuation 	13/11/2018
4 th	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How to make clear meaning in English, articulation • Writer's block/immediate feedback • Word grammar • Grammar structure • Order of argument • Vocabulary (academic/general) • Repetition in using phrases (<i>repetition of words (clashes/Phrases)</i>) • Translation of transcripts (cultural and language aspects) • Flora's writing (starting an introduction) • Maria's writing (clarity in writing/words) • How to concentrate on one thing in writing 	27/11/2018
5 th	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of 'Which' and 'that' • Adverbs • APA • Hedging (conclusion and discussion) • Tentative language (methodology) • Writer's block (ways of overcoming) • Repetition of similar sentences (structure/rewording) • Angy's writing 	11/12/2018
6 th	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ahmad talked about the benefits of the study (research) • Nima's writing • Referencing (Nima) • Punctuation marks • Difference between Humanities and Sciences • Thesis statement (structure) • Organisation of sentences and story • Use of pronouns • Punctuation • How to get feedback outside of the community 	18/12/2018

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoiding plagiarism, paraphrasing • Maria's writing • Consistency in punctuation • Clarity in writing • Articles 	
7 th	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vida's writing • Use of academic vocabulary (word choice) • Academic grammar and structure (complex) • Over use of phrases like (Which) and not using connectors • Academic language • Wording and clarity • Style of writing • Language used (report vs instruction) • Tenses • Supervisor feedback (indirect) 	08/01/2019
8 th	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Importance and implications of the study • Strategies they used (repetition) • Pros and cons of the learning community • When and how the learning community was useful • Ways the learning community could be modified and improved • Expectations of the learning community and study • Future of the learning community • University being in charge and the effects • Who should be in control, why and how, the consequences • Their situations • Intentions and reasons of participation • Change in their views towards writing and study • When are these learning communities most useful? • Bottom up and top down process • Different ways of learning and needs • Background and culture • The effect of the learning community and participation on their views and use • Qualities of an initiator • What can be a learning community? 	15/01/2019
9 th	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feedback participants received from participation in the study • What to do to improve writing? • How can writing be improved? • Getting daily feedback • Ways to teach yourself • Pros and cons of getting feedback • Learning from articles • Register • Paraphrasing and plagiarism (using quotations) • Planning for writing • Difficulties for second language speakers (consciousness and word choice) 	29/01/2019

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How to give feedback 	
10 th	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using other sources and strategies for writing improvement • Difference between strategies and their pros and cons • Feedback of Mona's supervisor • Linking or connecting words • Mona's writing • Difference in difficulty between natives and second language speakers/ dictionaries • Backing up claims • Diary and application of suggestions (Mona) • Organisation of thesis/ not being clear / using formats • What to put in chapters / methodology 	12/02/2019
11 th	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gains from the study • Feeling confident • Difference between fields • Gains as a teacher • Plans for the learning community for the future • How to reflect / learning about learning / others' experience • Difference between needs and strategies • Not being alone • Relationships between participants and facilitators • Feelings about sharing and why it worked • Why people left and what could be done? • The lacks and flaws • How were the participants and their participation different? • Why people joined? Why did they stay? • Stages of study, fields of study, their implications • Structured or loose? Methods used for the study and LC • Done by institutes or university, future of and implication of the study • Their plans afterwards, with the LC • Who was interested and who wasn't? why? • Who was taking the role of the leader? How could it continue? 	26/02/2019

Table 2. 3: The sessions and the topics discussed

After each session of the learning community, the facilitators and I held a reflective debriefing session. These debriefings initiated further decisions and planned new cycles of the action research process. The facilitators and I made plans according to what participants had raised in the session, although the planning was still loose so that other participants' ideas could drive the session.

In the following chapters, individual narratives are reported, highlighting participants' interests and emerging understandings. In addition, sessions one, four, seven, eight and, eleven are

reported in detail to illustrate the progress of the project. These are threaded through the chapter in appropriate places.

Data analysis and interpretation

Bogdan and Biklen (2007) and Bishop and Glynn (1999) state that analysis of data begins at the same time as data is being collected. Construction of the accounts of practice are made through the collaborative information gathering and interpretive analysis. As Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) reflect, this is more particularly evident in participatory action research, as it has a direct relation to the collaborative study, reframing, and reconstruction of social practices. Data analysis and data collection cannot, therefore, be entirely separated.

The analysis and interpretation of data started from the beginning of the study. Participatory action research process involves a continuing analysis of information during data collection. As part of the design, after each session of the learning community, the facilitators and I had a meeting to critically reflect on the session. In the meeting, apart from analysing the topics discussed and students' concerns, we also tried to shape a rough plan for the following session. Moreover, the facilitators and I each wrote journals about what we had observed and experienced from each session and we would email them to each other for further analysis and reflection. My reflective journal also helped me understand several things: the process of the study; participants' issues and how to be prepared for the following session.

During the collection of data, I transcribed each session and the interviews with the facilitators prior to the proceeding session. In the middle of the process, during the Christmas holidays, I was able to read the transcripts of each session and gain a deeper understanding of the data. This helped me gain a better understanding of how the learning community was working, helping me to make better decisions and plan for the rest of the study.

As the group gradually developed into a learning community, the continuity of collation of information, ideas, interpretations, reflections, and exploratory analysis became evident. Each participant's story began to emerge and key incidents began to stand out.

The end of session interviews were very important as in these the participants offered their own interpretations of how the community had functioned and what, if anything, was useful to them. Having re-read all the transcripts of sessions, I decided that the participants would be divided into three groups according to their involvement and participation in the study. Participants who had the highest rate of participation in the learning community were interviewed face-to-

face in a style of open dialogue that allowed them to make their own observations but also allowed me to probe further. A second group who had come less regularly were also interviewed face-to-face and were given the opportunity to explain their irregular attendance as well as offering their perceptions. The last group involved those who had only come once or twice. They were sent an email thanking them and asking them three questions: why did they join the learning community? Did they get anything out of it? Why did they drop out? All interviews were transcribed immediately after each meeting.

After the learning community had finished and all the participants' interviews had been completed, I started a further analysis and interpretation of the study. My aim was to establish links between the observations, transcripts of sessions and interviews, and my interpretations. The first interpretive analysis that I did was to write a section on the process of getting started. There I sought to identify the key elements of difficulty in the procedure of getting ethical approval and how they influenced the study. I also reflected on the procedure of recruiting participants, the fears I had at the beginning of the study, the decisions I had to make, the expectations I had and the expectations the participants seemed to have, and the challenge of engaging participants. I then proceeded to write drafts of narratives for each participant using their participation during the sessions and what they said in their final interview. In this way, writing successive drafts became a key process in reflective analysis and interpretation of what happened in the community and of what the results were for individual participants, including myself. This process aligns with what Ely et al. (1997) describe as a cyclic process of better understanding the meaning of data through successive drafts of writing and what Richardson and Pierre (2005) describe as using writing as a method of inquiry. It also aligns with how Tindall (2009) describes interpretative phenomenological analysis as seeking to capture how people themselves make sense of their experience.

After drafting several sections of chapters, I returned to the literature again and read it more carefully to reflect on what was emerging from my study. This allowed me to develop further layers of reflection and understanding.

I also refined my analysis and interpretation through feedback I received from participants including the facilitators, and from feedback to presentation at conferences. For example, I presented my proposal in the ECER conference in 2018 and was given feedback from the reviewers and audience that help me reflect on and refine my study before setting up the group.

As Noble (2007) suggested, such discussions and feedback helped me rethink and look at the study and analysis in other ways.

Decisions about presentation of findings

When I finished with the project, I had to find a way to present my findings in ways that made the most meaning. The purpose of the study was to explore how the development of a learning community could help international doctoral students identify their difficulties with academic writing and help them develop strategies to address those difficulties.

The first decision that I made was to present the findings in the form of narratives. As I studied the way learning communities worked and evolved, I realised the importance of participants' roles. Therefore, the views, understandings, and reflections of participants had a key role in the learning community. However, not all participants had significant participation and influence on the process of the project. Therefore, according to the attendance table, I chose three to focus and elaborate on, in depth. In addition, I decided to develop narratives of the facilitators and myself as we also had critical roles in the study. Later I decided to develop a composite narrative of all the remaining participants. Creating narratives provided a means to share the experiences of the participants and to show the development of their ideas about academic writing and their own problems, and to highlight both their emotional reactions, and their reactions to the study.

I also decided to record key incidents in the sessions where particular challenges or insights seemed to occur. After again reading and discussing the sessions, I selected those I considered were the most fruitful and influential sessions: session one, four, seven, eight, and eleven, within the research project and I wrote full reports of each session. Session one was selected since it was the initial session where the participants had the opportunity to get to know both about each other and the study. Session four was selected as it was the session where the participants started coming together and began to form the learning community. Session seven was selected as it was a session where Vida brought in her writing and her supervisor's edits and asked the group to help her find the ways in which his version was better. Considerable discussion and analysis followed. Session eight was selected as it was the workshop in which both facilitators were physically present and deep discussions on writing, learning communities and ways of study took place. Session eleven, the last session, was selected as participants discussed their gains from the study, their new understandings about academic writing, and how they saw the future of the learning community.

Finally, I made the decision to weave both the narratives and the accounts of key sessions together in a collage. My purpose sought to capture some of the complexity as well as the flow of what happened into one chapter.

In presenting the narratives, I decided not to cite specific dates for each participant's statement since I wished to focus on the topics discussed and ideas that arose rather than the chronology. However, because statements were embedded in time I felt it useful and appropriate to provide a table with the date of each session and detailed of the content that was discussed in each.

In this research, I am aware that the interpretations I have made reflect my point of view, but I have strived to be as objective as I could in viewing all perspectives.

Trustworthiness

This is a study located in time and place and involving specific participants. This does not mean that other students would have the same problems with academic writing, find similar strategies or have the same views about the usefulness of a learning community. The findings in this thesis do not claim to be generalisable; rather they are experiential, phenomenological, and situated in a particular context with specific people. However, the provision of an account of one such learning community is expected to raise possibilities, and perhaps questions, that may be useful in other contexts.

I have acknowledged that inevitably there is subjectivity in this study, in that I was directly involved and ultimately as the author and researcher, I have selected what to include and not include. However, my subjectivity was mediated by the opinions of the two other facilitators and by feedback from the participants. There were, therefore, multiple points of view used to look at the data.

In addition, the richness of the data sources provide the basis for a detailed and robust record of what occurred. Within the various sources of data, there are means of triangulating or questioning what I or other participants interpreted. In other words, the body of data provides what Richardson (1994) called crystallisation of what occurred.

Constraints of the study

As I acknowledged earlier in this chapter, this learning community was set up specifically for my research project. That fact means that it operated under slightly artificial time constraints, both those created by the need to provide prior detailed information about timing before getting approval by the ethics committee, and those shaped by my need to get started on my research

and by participants' other commitments. A learning community that was set up with a programme of study by either an individual supervisor or a faculty would probably have a more organic structure and flow, and participating students might have a better initial understanding of what to expect. There might perhaps be no definite end to the community; it might be more on-going and self-generating. In addition, the participants in this learning community were more diversified in their fields of study than is likely to occur in one that has been set up for non-research-based academic purposes. Perhaps these factors created more initial confusion in my project than would occur in supervisor or faculty led communities, and perhaps those communities would find it easier to regenerate according to the needs of the participants.

The following chapter presents the collage of narratives and session reports that I developed.

Chapter Three: Review of literature

Introduction

The first section of this chapter reviews a selection of studies that have some commonalities with the one I report in this thesis. The subsequent sections review literature that provides a conceptual framework for my study, particularly in the fields of the challenges and difficulties experienced by international doctoral students, the concepts of agency, and the processes of action research and participatory action research.

Doctoral students and learning communities

There is a small, but perhaps growing, body of literature that reports studies of doctoral students participating in learning communities.

A New Zealand study (Lai, 2015) reported the progress and outcomes of an online learning community consisting of twelve doctoral students. It found that there was a high level of knowledge construction in some of the discussions, and that leadership played an important role in facilitating the discussions. An Australian study (Parker, 2009) reported the use of scholarly writing groups in doctoral Education in the Social Sciences. It found that most participants reported an increase in confidence and improved networks, but very few believed their writing had improved as a result of participation. Parker argued that the complex nature of different forms of academic writing made it hard for students themselves to assess improvement. She further commented on the difficulty of maintaining a community of learning within the confines of a doctoral degree programme. A Finnish study of 602 doctoral students (Pyhältö et al., 2009) found that they had considerably varying experiences of feeling if they were members of a scholarly community, with about a third not seeing themselves as part of a community at all. The researchers concluded there was urgent need to foster doctoral students' experience of active participation and agency within scholarly communities.

These three studies position learning communities as a positive alternative to the isolation of doctoral students. At the same time they acknowledge the difficulties of maintaining such communities within the university environment. They do, however, all suggest that universities should seek to develop and resource such communities. Their studies indicate the value of further studies in this field, and my study seeks to make such a contribution.

Several articles by Greenwood and her colleagues (Greenwood et al., 2013; Greenwood et al., 2015) discuss the positive outcomes of a doctoral learning community such as the potential for supervisors and students to learn from each other about each other's contexts and knowledge systems and the development of joint research projects and publications. Elsewhere Greenwood talks about the usefulness of learning communities for deconstructing hegemonic concepts of knowledge and values (Greenwood & Levin, 2016) and for creating an environment where power can be shared (Greenwood, 2020). These articles highlight the usefulness of such communities, but they do not report how such communities can be set up and facilitated. My study seeks to address that gap.

A study by Henderson and Noble (2013) of a learning circle approach with at risk first year Education students found that the weekly meetings involving discussion, reflection, and problem-solving helped the students to both develop a sense of agency and capacity to make sense of their multiple identities within and outside the university. Henderson and Noble provide a rich narrative of how their circle evolved and functioned. Their study offers a prompt for other researchers to provide narrative accounts of how particular learning communities develop and function, as I seek to do in this study.

In addition to these studies, I found a range of further international writings that discuss the benefits of learning communities, some of which are in university contexts.

Smith (2003) stated that learning today is not seen as the individual acquiring of knowledge but as a social process. Globalisation and rapid change have brought up the need for new systems of learning and, as Stoll et al. (2006) argued based on their review of literature, communities of learning bring benefits in helping students adapting to changes. However, as Hord (2009) argued, changing a process from instructor-centred to learner-centred needs fundamental change. In postgraduate studies, as Smith (2003) explained, learning is predominantly self-centred; therefore, there has been an increase of interest in writing groups for doctoral students due to the need for a variety of supervision pedagogies, short time completion and pressure of funds, and the increase in international research communities and their complications. These studies indicate the importance of learning communities to meet the changing demands of today's world, and especially for postgraduate students.

The fact that students are accepted into a PhD programme might indicate academic ability, but does not mean that they will feel secure about their competencies and abilities in their work and academic writing. Therefore, as Guerin et al. (2013) argued, receiving feedback in a safe

environment from trusted academics is important as it helps participants to build confidence in their own ability, to grow educationally, and to improve their work. My study explores how the incremental development of a learning community might build mutual trust and respect and so allow people to feel at ease in sharing work and giving and receiving feedback.

An important aspect of postgraduate studies and especially of the PhD journey, as argued by Guerin et al. (2013), is the isolation and loneliness of the student. During the PhD journey, students are engaged in in-depth original work that mostly consists of individual projects and spending long hours researching on their own. Many struggle to understand the complexities of the arguments they meet in the journals they read, to identify the conceptual basis they might work from, to crystallise their findings, and especially to find the right vocabulary and writing style to report their work. Therefore, as Boud and Lee (2005) and Ferguson (2009) argued, there is the belief among academics that the PhD journey is an individual and solitary process. For international students, isolation as Guerin et al. (2013) argued, can become a major problem. Further, as Dodge and Kendall (2004) reflected in their American study, most PhD students commute between their university and home in isolation and do not develop strong connections with their fellow students. According to Guerin et al. (2013), the development of learning communities helps students deal with isolation during their PhD journey.

Learning that takes place in the learning community, according to Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist paradigm, emerges as a result of different conversations and interactions between individuals and their collaborative investigation of the social environment they live in. Vangrieken et al. (2017) stated that a learning community can be initiated either as a result of a bottom-up or a top-down process.

Various scholars have researched doctoral writing groups. Cahusac de Caux et al. (2017) reviewed literature to highlight the positive aspects of participation in doctoral writing groups. In line with other research studies, they found that learning communities with experience and time develop a feeling of belonging, while at the same time creating links between students and lecturers (Gabelnick et al., 1990; Levine & Shapiro, 2000). The review also identified that continuous peer feedback and discussion should be used to help students verbalise their internal reflective thinking and to foster reflective practice skills development. Moreover, the study affirmed the importance of establishing doctoral writing support groups to enhance the development of individual students' personal epistemology, academic growth, and professional

practice. Their review emphasised the importance of the reflective skills that learning communities could help create.

Dingyloudi et al. (2019) reviewed the literature to find the most important aspects of learning communities for postgraduate international students. They found that most researchers studied several outcome measures. These measures included students' success (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008); students' motivation (Stefanou & Salisbury-Glennon, 2002); students' engagement (Rocconi, 2011; Zhao & Kuh, 2004); and students' academic and social attitudes (Bonilla et al., 2013).

Dingyloudi et al. (2019) argued that the practice of establishing communities of learning are extra activities that are created inside educational institutions. Such communities do not become part of the curriculum system but rather work alongside it, as they are voluntary. Communities of learning are therefore considered as neither instructional approaches nor as purely self-emergent, independent groups organised by educators or researchers. As Dingyloudi and Strijbos (2018) argued, the system of sharing in learning communities is through peer feedback, which is used to share knowledge and experience or to give advice, and it ideally includes task-specific feedback. Dingyloudi et al. (2019) also reflected that the success of learning communities is not dependent on objectification of knowledge or its outcomes, rather it is dependent on students' definition and perception of success. Their study indicated that in studying learning communities, success must be analysed by the participants within them. I have been encouraged by their assertion in my decision to present the findings of my own study in terms of narratives of participants' experiences in which they discuss their learnings.

Zhao and Kuh's (2004) study, with a large sample of first-year and senior American college students, focuses on the relationship between students' participation in learning communities and student engagement, finding that there was a positive relationship with engagement as well as with self-reporting of learning outcomes and overall satisfaction with being a part of institutes. They suggested that universities should implement and promote the use of learning communities, with consideration of the number of existing communities, their participants, and their stage of study. They noted that men, transfer students, and part-time students have a lower chance of taking part in learning communities. However, emphasising Lenning and Ebberts's (1999) study, Zhao and Kuh indicated the need for further research on different kinds of learning communities to study their effect and impact on learning and success and, in line with

Pike (2000), the authors indicated the importance of understanding all aspects of the potential of learning communities and of evaluating their direct effects. In another American study, Tinto (2003) argued that engagement of students in learning communities, especially from the early stages of their studies, helps their learning and the engagement remains strong up to the final years. As these were all in America, there remains a challenge to study doctoral students in other national contexts and to investigate how their needs may be met in learning communities.

Guerin et al. (2013) conducted research at a university in Australia on a thesis-writing group in order to find the positive value of writing groups. The participants were PhD candidates, who came from different cultural and language backgrounds and collaborated for six to twelve months. Participants joined the group for various reasons, such as seeking to improve the development of their writing skills and their wider language skills, wanting more feedback, or simply belonging to an academic community. The results indicated that diversity within the group provided significant value as interaction between students at different stages and with different needs helped PhD candidates improve their academic writing and communication skills. In addition, collaborative work led to inclusive and dynamic research communities. Further, it was reflected that for the learning community to continue after the end of the study, it had to be student centred. Guerin et al, (2013) argued that the existence of these communities takes account of feelings of individual isolation experienced through the PhD journey, and as a result creates collaboration, a feeling of belonging, therefore providing invaluable emotional and social support in the early stages of academic study. As Cameron et al. (2009) and Wellington (2010) also argued that acknowledgement of shared difficulties helped participants overcome their anxiety and emotional concerns. The group they studies helped improve and develop students' writing and English language skills in regards to grammar and vocabulary.

These research studies clearly affirmed the value of learning communities in developing academic confidence and communication skills, and in providing social and emotional support. In a number of the studies, diversity rather than homogeneity was regarded as a catalyst for dialogue and for potential learning. The value of these studies for my project was twofold: they served as an encouragement to explore how doctoral students in my university would interact in a learning community and they signalled that social aspects of participation were as important as academic ones.

International doctoral students and academic writing

The Careers Research and Advisory Centre (2012) found that academic writing is especially important for those who are in universities and where research is required, and particularly those for who do doctoral degrees. For doctoral students, having competency in academic writing is crucial, as they are required to write their thesis using academic language. As English (2006), Thomas (2005) and Wasley (2008) discussed, when students move into higher degrees, the importance of competency in academic writing also increases. Winston and Fields (2003) further emphasised that when it comes to doctoral thesis students, academic writing becomes even more important.

Proficiency in English academic writing, as Cooper and Bikowski (2007) reported, is especially important for international students in English medium universities, who embark on graduate or postgraduate study, as they have to be prepared for the requirements of their institutes and departments. This is significant when considering two studies by Casanave (2002) and Soe (2003) respectively, who reported that none of the postgraduate students in their study were aware of the requirements for their writing, regardless of their native language or educational background.

David (2009) has also reflected that attention to developing support structures in academic writing for second language speakers is increasingly important in higher education, as the number of international students has increased.

In the EFL context, researchers have different views on what needs addressing. Abdulkareem (2013) emphasised that sufficient attention should be given to writing conventions, grammar, academic words and phrases. On the other hand, Van de Poel and Gasiorek (2012), and Tardy and Swales (2014) argued that skills taught to students should be specific to their academic purposes, genres, and disciplines.

Higher Education Funding Council for England (2010) reported that international second language speakers of English take more time than required to finish their studies. Chiappetta-Swanson and Watt (2011) argued that the reason students take longer could be due to weak development of thesis writing strategies. At the same time, according to Aitchison et al. (2010) universities have also increased the pressure for more publications. These factors have made doctoral students, professors, and universities more critical towards academic writing. The pressure caused by the need to understand the expectations of academic writing, as Singh (2016) and Bronson (2004) argued, is greater for second language speakers facing challenges

in observing the rigours of discipline-based writing. These studies have highlighted the importance of investigations into postgraduate second language speakers' writing and the strategies they and their departments use to improve their writing.

Various research studies have reported different reasons for students' academic writing weakness. Khachan and Bacha (2012), in a study of active vocabulary in L1 Arabic students' writing, reported that teachers had found students' writing to be weak, specifically those from non-Anglicised backgrounds. In another study of Chinese students who were taught in English, Cai (2017) found seventy percent of students did not take any academic writing courses. Berman and Cheng (2001) and Van de Poel and Gasiorek (2012) argued that another factor that could hinder international students from improving their academic writing is that being in another country brings its own significant challenges for them that takes some of their attention, time and energy.

Al Fadda (2012) studied the writing difficulties of second language postgraduate students at a university in Saudi Arabia. In his research, he reflected that students face difficulty in differentiating written from spoken words and phrases. Al Fadda (2012) also reflected that students have difficulty expressing their own voice due to their difficulty in exploiting relevant references, studying them and putting the various ideas together in a logical order.

Chou (2011) researched Taiwanese doctoral students in the United States to find their writing difficulties and their causes. Students who studied Humanities and Social Sciences found academic writing to be imperative in their field and needed to be assisted to develop their language skills. The main challenges that they faced were in regards to the quantity and types of writing they had to deal with. Moreover, they spent a lot of time selecting their topic to investigate and write about. Reflecting on the source of their writing difficulties, Chou reported that the language and cultural background of students, which determined their critical thinking methods and expectations in writing, was a major influencer of academic writing difficulty. Further, Chou (2011) added that L1 interference, inadequacy of ideas, and unclear instructions could be another cause of writing difficulty that can be further influenced by shyness in asking for help and feedback.

Evans and Green (2007) and Phakiti and Li (2011) have argued that although international students gain language proficiency qualifications, such qualifications are not enough and students still face difficulties in regards to writing conventions. Chou (2011), Tahaineh (2010), Catterall et al. (2011), and Mohammad Almatarneh et al. (2018) have suggested that

universities should have more writing courses for graduate and postgraduate students focusing on international students' academic writing, which should be mandated and offered by departments. Al-Khairy (2013) suggested that departments could familiarise students with the proper terminology, format, and style of their research area at the beginning of each course. The significance of a socialised writing programme in their academic community, as Van de Poel and Gasiorek (2012) argued, is that students learn relevant skills that would significantly impact their knowledge of academic writing conventions, ease discussion and editing, and improve their own perception as able and knowledgeable writers and that, in turn, could develop with their sense of agency.

The complexity and challenges of academic writing

A number of scholars and researchers highlight the complexity of the process of writing. Al Fadda (2012) defined writing as "...a mental and cognitive activity since it is a product of the mind" (p. 124). He further defined academic writing as the ability to develop one's own voice through finding relevant references, evaluating them, and putting the key ideas together in a way that makes sense. Abu-Ghararah (1998) defined academic writing as "... the logical organization and arrangement of the written sentences within a paragraph and paragraphs within the units of discourse ...and the expression of the ideas" (p. 87). Similarly, but with different emphasis, Paul and Elder (2006) considered academic writing process as the relationship between thinking ability and writing ability.

Studies by researchers have emphasised the importance of research on academic writing for international students. Starfield (2010) emphasised the importance of researching multilinguals, reflecting that such research provides insights into their views and thoughts of the world based on their background. International students' academic writing is highlighted further by Arkoudis and Tran (2007) and Hyland (2007) who emphasised that it is not only necessary for their thesis success, but also necessary for sustaining arguments and synthesising ideas. This is understood better when we consider Cadman (1997) who reflected the effect of different epistemologies rooted in students' identities on writing difficulties. In the current study, I repeatedly found evidence of the way the previous academic background, and its implicit epistemology, of the participants affected their perceptions of themselves as students and their approach to academic writing.

Silva (1993), Dong (1998), and Hinkel (2002) found that native and second language speakers of English differ in some important ways. Their differences, they found, in general mostly are

textual patterns; argument structure; use of background reading texts; reader orientation; patterns of cohesion; the construction of sentences; lexical choices; use of transitions between propositions and topics; sequencing and development of propositions and in the composing processes of writing. Interestingly, several participants in my current study also alluded to such problems. Silva (1993) argued that acknowledgment of the differences between native speakers and second language speakers is important in fairly addressing their needs and in giving them an equal chance for academic success.

Some researchers (Hamrick et al., 2018; Ströbel et al., 2020) have argued that learning one language could help familiarise a person with the meaning and use of language which in turn can help with learning a second language. Cook (2001) reflected that common elements in between two languages can benefit learners, but when the two languages differ in system, language acquisition is hindered. Cook and Cook (1993) have explained that when it comes to writing, the first language can interfere with the second language when the languages differ. Cook and Cook added that acquisition is different between first and second languages since first language acquisition occurs within natural circumstances whereas second language development and usage often takes place in circumstances which are other than usual and this may cause problems. This, too, is a theme that is echoed by participants in the current study.

Grabe and Kaplan (1996) noted that people also find writing academically in their native language challenging. According to Grami (2010), this may be due to the fact that academic writing is not a skill that can easily be learned and achieved - rather it needs careful thinking, discipline, and focus. This is a more significant issue for second language speakers, as reported by Al Badi, (2015) who suggested that writing academically in a second language was considerably more difficult. Ballard and Clanchy (1997) argued that facing difficulties, struggling with academic writing and what's more trying to find appropriate forms, conventions, and meet expectations could in fact have demotivating effects on international students' writing. A number of students in the current study reported that they knew their writing was not satisfactory but did not know how to fix it.

Various research studies reported on the academic writing difficulties students face. One of the most challenging areas of writing difficulty, according to Leisak (1989), is grammar. Studies by Al-Khasawneh (2010) and Almatarneh and Gamallo (2018) indicated that students struggle with outlining, summarising, and paraphrasing. On the other hand, Ahmed and Alamin (2012) and Al Murshidi (2014) highlighted still other difficulties, including forming, developing, and

organising ideas. Al Badi (2015) argued that students have difficulty in using the appropriate sentence structures, developing paragraphs and achieving coherence. Other researchers such as Dalem (2010), Parsons (2010), and Yong (2010) found second language students' difficulties to be with run-on sentences, fragments and verbiage, inclusion of necessary information, use of different type of sentences, subject-verb agreement, placement of modifiers, tense agreement and parallel construction. Al Badi (2015) found the least difficulties of students' difficulties were with referencing and citations. One significant point, according to Ahmed and Alamin (2012), is that facing difficulties in academic writing could make students hesitant in paraphrasing their work and that this can lead to plagiarism.

In a Southeast Asian context, Singh (2016) investigated the academic writing difficulties of international Masters students at a university in Malaysia. Findings of the study indicated that as result of a lack of exposure, students found there to be a mismatch between their previous writing knowledge and experience, and the expectations of their Masters programmes. As other researchers have also indicated, this mismatch prohibited the students from adapting to the expectations of their institute (Andrade, 2008; Campbell & Li, 2008; Wong, 2004). The areas students had most difficulty with were: writing literature reviews; explaining methodology; reporting findings; explaining analysis; using academic style relevant to their discipline; APA formatting; plagiarism; writing coherently; and using formal language to express ideas. Another study by Manjet (2015) stated that writing the introduction, recommendations, conclusion, references, and bibliography were the easier sections of the thesis for students. The basic cause of difficulty in academic writing, as Kleisar (2005) argued, is a mismatch between the traditional style of teaching grammar by teachers and student's insufficient grammar practice.

There have been studies by different researchers on strategies that can be used to improve academic writing. These include: writing courses (Sallee et al., 2011); content area courses (McCarthy, 2008); and the use of rubrics, Turnitin, and track changes in giving feedback (Plakhotnik & Rocco, 2016). Rose (1985) argued that academic writing in general needs full and active engagement with the facts and principles of a specific discipline.

The studies reviewed above highlight the complexity and multi-faceted nature of the thinking, planning and direct writing activities that fall under the general heading of academic writing. As I report elsewhere in this thesis, I began the current study with a relatively narrow awareness of what academic writing entails and held a focus primarily on correctness of grammar and

appropriateness of vocabulary. As I developed my own understandings and carried out my project these studies have helped make me more aware of the writing issues that my participants raised. These studies have also highlighted the need for universities to support international students in developing their academic writing skills, and I see my project as a venture in that direction.

Surface errors

Various researchers have investigated writing errors or mistakes. This section reviews studies of the factors that might predict writing errors or mistakes. These factors have mostly been identified through assessment or feedback received from students.

The work of Corder (1967) has been considered an inspiration in the field of error analysis and changed the perception on its importance for students, teachers, and researchers. For teachers, knowledge of errors informs them of students' progress and needs; for researchers it acknowledges language-learning methods; and for students it helps elucidate different hypotheses they have upon language learning.

In the context of L2 learning, Corder (1967) considers errors as systematic and unsystematic; he distinguishes errors from mistakes. He defines systematic errors as those that are related to the fundamental language knowledge of the student and which could or can identify their second language developmental level. On the other hand, he defines unsystematic errors as mistakes that are the result of memory lapses, slips of the tongue and other errors related to performance. The difference between mistakes and errors, according to Corder, is that if mistakes are brought to the users' attention they are able to amend them, whereas if systemic errors are brought to their attention they are unable to distinguish them due to a lack of knowledge.

Corder highlights two important points about systemic errors. First "the occurrence of errors is merely a sign of the present inadequacy of the teaching techniques" (p. 163). This means that there is no perfect teaching method. If there was, he argues, no errors would exist and there would be no need for research. Second, because errors have so many sources, even teachers' best methods would not be satisfactory. Accordingly, knowing how to deal with errors and overcoming them is more important than identifying them. This emphasises the value of research on students' strategies in overcoming writing difficulties.

Lee (1997) argued that students' greatest difficulty is detecting errors, rather than lack of knowledge, and found that students have a narrow knowledge of grammatical terms. However, when students detect errors, according to various researchers, they are more able to correct surface errors than deep errors (Englert et al., 1988; Faigley et al., 1981; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1983; Sommers, 1980). Guénette and Lyster (2013) argued that treating errors is important and teachers should select, mark, and notify students of their errors, because if these are not treated, it could lead to the retention of the errors.

These research studies of errors are significant to my research study for two main reasons. Firstly, I started my project with the attitude that improvement of academic writing would consist largely of students' identification of the errors they most commonly make and the development of strategies to overcome them. (As I report in following chapters I gradually expanded my understanding.) Secondly, many of the students themselves came with a similar attitude and a lot of the discussion in the group's earlier sessions was about students' identification problems with vocabulary and grammar structures.

The concept of agency

This section reviews studies of the concept and operation of agency, which is an important aspect of my research question. In popular usage, agency refers to the capacity of a person to act independently and make their own choices. That is the sense in which I have used the word *agency* in my research question. However, various theorists have examined the conditions that shape agency and explored different ways in which it is enacted. I review some of the key writings in this section. I begin with literature regarding emotional intelligence as many theorists consider this as the base of agency.

Emotional intelligence

Aghasafari (2006), Fahim and Pishghadam (2007), and Ghanizadeh and Moafian (2010) have reflected that increasing research related to emotional competence in the field of ESL/EFL has affirmed emotional intelligence's predicative validity. Emotional intelligence, according to Aki (2006), is considered more influential and important in language learning in comparison to purely intellectual intelligence or IQ. A large amount of research supports the fact that emotional intelligence is related to success in different areas of life, such as effective teaching, language acquisition, quality relationships, academic performance, and reduction of anxiety about foreign language (Alavinia & Alikhani, 2014; Brackett et al., 2004; Dewaele et al., 2008; Fahim & Pishghadam, 2007; López-Vargas et al., 2017; Pishghadam, 2009; Sutton &

Wheatley, 2003). Krashen (1981) also stated that language learning is a difficult and exhausting task, which causes stress and anxiety for students.

Zafari and Biria (2014) tried to find a relationship between emotional intelligence and language learning strategies used. In accordance with other researchers, the authors found that there is a relationship between: EQ and academic success (Besharat et al., 2005); second language performance (Pishghadam, 2009); language learning strategy use (Aghasafari, 2006); and memory, cognitive and compensation strategies (Fouladi, 2012). In addition, Aghasafari (2006) had also established that EQ and learning strategies have a positive relationship with each other.

These research studies highlight the emotional and affective aspects of study and writing. The reports of participants' experiences in my study also indicate the significance of their feelings about, as well as understandings of, academic writing.

Agency

Freire (1970) considers human agency, which is at the heart of his emancipatory approach to education, as the capacity to change oneself and one's situation for the better. It involves the process of learning more about one's condition and the forces that shape it and developing the capacity to make choices and act upon them in order to improve one's condition. A resource on New Zealand's Education Hub (2019), citing Klemenčič (2015), stresses the importance of the role of agency in learning. It explains that agency "describes the ability to identify goals and desired outcomes, and to pursue those goals proactively, purposefully and effectively." It emphasises that in educational contexts agency should be understood "to incorporate both action and intention." It is in this broad sense that I use the term in my research question.

Leslie (1982) and Mandler (1992) argued that when a child is born, he or she has no sense of personal agency and, through transactional experiences with the environment, he or she constructs a sense of self. At the initial stages of a child's life, he or she is able to view sensitivity to causal relations between environmental events. As children start to cultivate behavioural abilities, they observe and experience that their actions have an outcome and therefore develop a sense of personal agency. As Knoblich and Flach (2003) have argued, agency in action is what differentiates us from other people and the world.

Millar and Schaffer (1972) and Watson (1979) argued that comprehending that actions can produce some definite results could be enhanced by linking those results to their actions using support that directs the person's mind to the results made, and through heightening the salience

and functional value of the results. This highlights the development of the sense of personal agency, as it emphasises a shift of the perception of agency from action causality to personal causality.

Various scholars defined agency in different ways but most have the idea of personal control as a core and central meaning. Bandura (2006) considers human agency similar to the idea of free will and the potential to exercise control over thoughts and actions. Synofzik et al. (2008) reflected that individuals have a distinctive feeling of being in control or “sense of agency” for occurrences initiated by their own actions. Haggard and Chambon (2012) and Gallagher (2000) highlighted that the sense of agency relates to the feeling of controlling, causing or generating own action and external happenings. Therefore, as Haggard et al. (2002) stated, in some contexts the sense of agency has implications for moral responsibility and choosing between wrong and right.

Agency according to Hon et al. (2018), is known to be the result of comparing the anticipated representation of a result and the real result that happens, thus determining how the outcomes of one’s own initiatives are separated from those caused by others. According to various researchers (Hon & Poh, 2016; Wegner et al., 2004; Wegner & Wheatley, 1999), when actual outcomes match assumed ones, agency increases.

Yoon (2011), on the other hand, differentiates the characteristics of human agency from self-efficacy by explaining that self-efficacy centres more on personal beliefs and about what one perceives of their ability to achieve certain tasks, whereas agency is the ability to control the task. He added that human agency principles have an effect if structured into instruction more explicitly and could have more effect in general application of the concept. Bandura (2001) further adds that human agency is the characteristic of people who acquire what they perceive.

According to Bandura (2006) there are four core properties to human agency. The first feature of human agency is intentionality. Intentionality refers to the time when people form intentions that involve action plans and strategies for realising them. Second is forethought, which involves the temporal extensions of agency. This feature includes more than future directed plans and individuals’ set goals, and is able to predict outcomes of prospective actions to direct and motivate efforts. The third feature of human agency is self-reactiveness, which refers to the fact that humans naturally contribute to their own life circumstances and are not just products of them. Agents are not only considered as planners and fore-thinkers but they are also considered as self-regulators. Fourth is self-reflectiveness- the belief that the goal for

humans is to be self-examiners of their own functionality. Having the ability of free will, they easily can distinguish right from wrong and reflect on their actions.

Bandura (2000) also stated that the concept of human agency is not limited to the individual exercise of personal agency, offering a social-cognitive theory which distinguishes three different forms of agency used in everyday life as personal, proxy, and collective.

Personal agency is exercised individually and influences functioning and environmental events that can be influenced by one. Exercise of personal agency and the cognitive, motivational, affective, and how choice processes influence effects have been the core points of focus of theorising and research on human agency. Conversely, as Bandura (2000) argued in defining proxy, various activities do not directly have control over social conditions and institutional practices that affect lives and in these situations, proxy agency produces well-being and security. Each individual in the socially mediated mode of agency tries to influence another with expertise or influence and power to act on his or her behalf in order of receiving desired results. Bandura (2000) further defined collective agency by stating that in life, humans do not live in individual autonomy, rather a considerable number of things they seek are achieved by collaborative work through inter-dependent effort. Therefore, people need to work interdependently in order to gain what cannot be accomplished on their own or individually. As Stajkovic and Lee (2001) further reflected, the achievements of a group are the result of the shared knowledge and skills of each individual and the result of their transaction in interactive, coordinative, and synergistic dynamics. Hence, as Bandura (2000) highlighted, perceived collective efficacy is the outcome of an emergent group level property not just the result of individual's efficacy beliefs. It could perhaps be argued that in a group that explores an issue together, each individual may or may not develop and exercise personal agency in seeking to improve their writing. The facilitators may seek to exercise some form, slight or strong, of proxy agency in facilitating discussion and thought, and the group as a whole may evolve a form of collective agency by co-creating an environment which encourages learning.

Another form of agency is moral agency, which as defined by Bandura (2004) and Rorty and Wong (1993), concerns feelings of right and wrong in human beings. Moral agency has two aspects, which are inhibitive and proactive. Inhibitive agency concerns the will to cease insignificant and inhumane behaviour. On the other hand, proactive agency involves the will to behave humanely. Consequently, as Bandura (1999) reflects, humane actions are the result

of exercising these two forms of morality, inhibitive and proactive, in addition to the avoidance of doing harmful actions.

Bandura (2002) considered moral agency a significant part of human agentic theory that is embedded in personal standards which in turn are linked to self-sanction. People use standards of right and wrong to guide and deter them from action in developing moral agency. To prevent self-condemnation, actions that violate moral standards are prohibited and actions that lead to satisfaction and a sense of self-worth are encouraged. Hence, moral agency is practised through the constraint of negative self-sanctions of conduct which violate moral standards, and through the support of positive self-sanctions for conduct that is faithful to moral standards. Initially, I did not see the concept of moral agency as particularly relevant to my study, but perhaps it might be useful to account for why some of the participants joined.

Keller and Edelstein (1993) reflected that, when faced with social obligations, those with moral agency stay committed to them, stand by the moral implications of their choices and accept responsibility for their actions and their consequences. Shweder (2003) reflected that activities considered moral are considered to be culturally situated. Among all cultures in the world, most have commonalities between them, but vary in terms of values, meanings and the customs. In some aspects of life, people behave communally and, in many other aspects, live individualistically. Conversely as Shweder (2003) highlighted, that all forms of agency associated to individual, proxy, and collective agency vary culturally and across different periods of life.

Bandura (2006) also argued that students today (albeit over a decade ago) are becoming agents of their own learning. This is because social realities have changed through the revolutionary changes in communication. One of the changes is students' exercise of control over their learning as they can easily access libraries, museums, and multimedia instruction virtually and use them to get educated without the limitations of time and place. In this regard, Joo et al. (2000) argued that students with higher agency can learn better.

Assessing agency

As Karp (1986) explained, a sense of agency can be studied both explicitly and implicitly. Explicit tests of agency have the objective of making explicit assessments of the task, obtained through self-report measures using (for example) Likert-type scales. On the other hand, as Haggard et al. (2002) and Moore and Haggard (2010) reflected, agency can also be assessed

implicitly, in which case agency assessment is not the initial objective of the participant. Instead, the participant is asked to do a task and the agency is evaluated from the results obtained.

Researchers (Tsakiris et al., 2007; Wegner & Wheatley, 1999) have stated that measuring agency explicitly by quantifying it, has its downsides. One of the downsides, as Daprati et al. (1997) and Tsakiris et al. (2007) have reflected, is that participants continuously overjudge their real agency over external events, as their explicit attributions have a consistent self-bias and as Woolfolk et al. (2006) argued, attributions are considered to be explicitly sensitive to a social and moral context.

In this study I do not seek to measure agency. Rather I seek to consider it broadly in the terms used by *The Education Hub* as the capacity to intentionally direct one's efforts to specific goals.

Action research

This section reviews literature in the field of action research and of its component, participatory action research. I have cited specific studies that inform my methodology in the previous chapter. However, it is important to acknowledge that the field is a wide and varied one and that its emerging concepts are the product of the work of many discussions and experimentations in the field. I review the concepts developed in key works in this section.

The social psychologist Lewin (1946) is known as the father of action research. Lewin (1952) first talked about action research in regard to community action programmes. Adelman (1993), citing Lewin (1946) makes the point that for action to be effective and influential, research has to be done and for research to be influential, action has to be taken in step with the research

A more recent definition of action research is from Glassman, Erdem, and Bartholomew (2013) who stated that through their participation humans use their ability to free themselves from disadvantageous social habits. The authors stated that action research acknowledges the importance of the group as a field of interaction that works together towards the same goal. In other words, action research involves flexible group work in which the status quo is not accepted and where change and research are pursued.

Glassman, Erdem, and Bartholomew (2013) added that action research operates on a basis that changing community interactional patterns is the best method to change a goal driven activity to a more collaborative decision making process that can lead to the emergence of collective action and new possibilities. This change is planned towards improvement and takes place with

continuing evaluation of the effects of actions, with a continuous process of refinement of plans for further action. They argued that through this process human interactions change and members of a community come to perceive their roles and those of others.

Kemmis et al. (2013) considered action research as applied research since its applicability is embedded in the project itself and its methodology aligns itself with social science research and a qualitative approach. They further explained the characteristics of action research and stated that it tends to be small and situational, that it usually involves qualitative research and that it has a continuous process of spiral cycles of research and action. The purpose of action research is to resolve a particular issue in a unique setting and not to make international changes, although the results of an action research project can be used to make general conclusions if needed through quantitative studies.

Zuber-Skerritt (2011) emphasised that the focus of action research is on participants in a community and their effect on the research process. During research, the researcher evaluates his or her own assumptions and their effect on the research process. This is called reflexivity. However, within reflexivity, the researcher needs to be aware of the self, as it reflects and may influence the analysis of social data based on the researcher's situational understanding of previous action research.

In terms of contexts, action research is used in many different fields such as education, social and health services, and community development. The similarity between and among these fields is that there has always been difficulty in transferring research knowledge to effective practical changes. Eduard Lindeman, Kurt Lewin, John Dewey, and Jean Piaget were the initial people who introduced action research as an adult education programme (cited in Glassman et al., 2013). This, according to Glassman et al. (2013), emphasises that in the field of education, action research has become an important means of investigation and of implementing change.

Zuber-Skerritt (1992; 2001) and Zuber-Skerritt et al. (2009) argued that action research can also be used to bring policy makers and practitioners to have a better understanding of each other by bringing them closer. Policy makers would gain more knowledge about practice and practitioners from the results of the studies thus allowing them to further influence their educational policies. They further stated that an implication of action research is that the knowledge it generates concerns the interrelation of human behaviour and sociocultural situations and that it includes rich and thick description in narrative form and is analysed in the way that readers can relate to.

Action research has many aims but, in summation, the main two aims are gaining a better understanding of the problem that exists, and improving the existing situation.

McTaggart and Kemmis (1988) highlighted two complementary aspects of the process of action research – the spiral process and the iterative process. The spiral process, as defined by Lewin (1946, 1952), consists of spiral cycles that repeat a series of steps of action and research. This repeated process consists of cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting, or the evaluation of the results of action, creating a spiralling effect.

Each of these cycles can be considered as an iterative process where at the end of each cycle the participants decide to refine practice, or solve a new problem that emerges during the dynamic process of inquiry, action and evaluation.

There are plans to do more action research in the next decade. In New Zealand, the Ministry of Education considers action research as a tool that could help evidence-based planning better student achievement (Ministry of Education, 2020a). The administrative history of action research in New Zealand education goes back to 1989 when the Department of Education started a project for raising awareness for sexist practices that had a seven-step action research model (Cardno, 2003).

Participatory action research

Some years after the introduction of action research, William Foote Whyte, through his sociological studies alongside Kurt Lewin and Tavistock's institute in the 1940s, introduced a further application of action research called participatory action research (PAR) (Glassman, Erdem, & Bartholomew, 2013). Today, according to many researchers, participatory action research is considered as an active risk taking process and also a study of social reflectivity that is supported by evidence, experience, and action (Brock & Pettit, 2007; Kindon et al., 2007; Reasons & Bradbury, 2008).

Mezirow (1990) and Glassman et al. (2013) argued that the main difference between action research and participatory action research is that action research focuses on education as an emancipating process that leads to cohesive, sustainable communities, whereas participatory action research focuses on the structure of organisation in context and how members of the community change action trajectories through change of interaction patterns. Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) further differentiated between the two by stating that while participatory action research shares the cyclic process of action research, where the basic form is planning,

acting, observing, and reflecting, it also ensures that concerns shared by a group are raised, described and explored, and that exploratory actions are initiated.

McTaggart (1994) argued that in participatory action research the intention of the researcher and participants is on making change and improvement, through studying, reframing, and reconstructing social practices. He further highlighted that in the education field, participatory action research is known as a collective, self-reflective enquiry that aims to improve educational practices by a group that shares the same concerns and intends to change the status quo. The role of participants in the research, according to Zuber-Skerritt (2011), is not just as subjects for research, but researchers inside the project. Cardno (2003) also reflected on the role of the researcher in participatory action research. She argued that researcher's view is important, as it is an evolving process that not only changes the participants, but recognised that the role of researcher as participant and the situation in which he or she acts was also important. People who use the participatory action research method find it provocative since, as Stringer (1999) stated, it is "enabling groups of people to formulate mutually acceptable solutions to their problems."

Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) stated that an important aspect of participatory action research is that it studies actual practices and not abstract ones. In its core, participatory action research includes real material, and the concrete, specific practices of a selected group of participants in chosen environments. The main interest of participatory action researchers is in general practices, and in changing those at hand.

Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) further stated that the outcomes of participatory action research process are actual and plausible changes that occur. According to Altrichter et al. (2002) and Bawden (1991), results gained from participatory action research can be used both in practical and theoretical ways and do not only benefit the participants but can be useful for a wider population. These changes include: what people do; how they interact with others and their environments; their meaning and values; and the discourse through which they interpret and comprehend the world. Participatory action research considers research as not only based on research techniques but also based on the tensions of the relationship between social and educational theory and practice. In Kemmis and McTaggart's (2005) view, practice is a combination of human social action that is the result of what they have been through in the past until the present and of a movement towards a future that involves their decisions.

MacDonald (2012), and McNiff and Whitehead (2012) reflected that participatory action research includes three types of change. These changes are the development of critical consciousness in researchers and participants, an improvement in the lives of participants in the research, and the transformation of societal structures and relationships.

Lee et al. (2020) reflected that, for participants of participatory action research, the definition of practice includes both individual and social aspects and is comprehended objectively and subjectively. Chevalier and Buckles (2019) considered participatory action research to be a scientific expression that assumes reflectivity and self-experimentation and the authors believe that more work needs to be done in order to strengthen the theoretical foundation of participatory action research.

Cycles of action research and participatory action research

Researchers have adopted various emphases in describing the cycles of action research and participatory action research. Two are briefly reviewed here.

Cardno (2003) argued that participatory action research acknowledges humans as social beings who can be part of groups. She explained that to change the culture of groups, change within and with others is needed and that this can be achieved through changing the substances, forms and patterns of language, activities, and social relationships. To have continuous attention, reflection, and action, participants must engage and reflect on their changes and actions. Thus a focus on action plus observation and reflection would allow the discovery of constraints imposed and the changes and developments needed.

In Cardno's (2003) view, action research has three cyclic phases. These include first, investigation and analysis, second, planning and action, and finally, evaluation and reflection. When this process ends, another issue is identified and the cycle process is repeated. Due to the flexible, responsive and dynamic nature of action research, there can also be mini spin-off cycles in between the cycles. Spin-off cycles can also be investigated and become the main focus of the study and thus lead to other cycles, or they can be addressed and used as new data. Cardno (2003) highlights the overlapping of action and reflection and reflects that it is for people to learn from their own experience and make this experience available to others. However, she reminds us that real situations are complex and, in action, it is impossible to determine all the things that need doing.

Defining each step, Cardno (2003) explained that in step one, an issue that is in need of significant attention should be selected. Step two investigates the issue by collecting evidence/data/information. The third step thinks about the implications and starts the analysis of the situation. Step four makes changes to the situation at hand, and begins planning an action. In the fifth step, with the use of planning and by monitoring the effects, action is taken. In the sixth step, assurance of effect and change is needed to evaluate the data from step two, and to check on possible issues, and ways of sustaining change. The last step is at the end. Depending on the results, either the plan is revised or another issue that requires attention is selected. An important aspect of this approach is that issues can still be examined and addressed even when the facilitator has left.

Kemmis et al. (2013) stated that participatory action research has individual and collective spirals of the self-reflective cycle. Group members conduct the action research procedure by planning action together, acting, and observing individually or collectively, and reflecting together. In a more recent work by Kemmis et al. (2014), also mentioned previously by Kemmis and McTaggart (2005), the steps include: planning, acting and observing; reflecting; re-planning; acting and observing again; reflecting again, and so on...

Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) also defined each of the main steps. In their definition, planning is developed while being flexible and anticipating the unpredictable. A plan should not be too narrow, but open-minded, open-eyed, responsive, and open to record the unexpected. Action is intentional though controlled, and factors that need to be evaluated are considered and acknowledged. In observation, the outcomes of important informed actions are documented. To observe you have to plan, in order to have a documentary basis for further reflection. During observation, in action research a journal is needed to critically record observations that were not planned. The intention of observation should be on providing a clear and definite basis for critical self-reflection. Reflection aims to make meaning out of processes, problems, issues and constraints. Talks and discussions between participants can help reflection. Reflection also has a descriptive role that allows reconnaissance, building a more vivid picture and anticipating what might now be possible for individual members and groups.

Kemmis et al. (2013) noted, however, that this continuous self-contained cycle may not be as neat as stated. They explained that during the process, stages overlap each other and plans set at the beginning will change as experience is gained. Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) argued

that the main purpose of defining this cycle is not to meticulously take each step, but rather to engage in critical development and evaluation of practice and understandings.

According to Kemmis et al. (2014), in critical participatory action research the spiral process can be too mechanical to serve the purpose of the work. In their view, the aim of participatory action research is to involve the participants in a broad social analysis of the situation and circumstances they are in while self-analysing their practice to change and improve their situation.

Kemmis et al. (2013) also argued that all participants in action research should keep a journal so that the process of learning through action research can be monitored. By reflecting and writing thoughts on involvement in the project in a journal, a habit of continuous thinking can be created. As a record, it also enables the review of participants' actions and progress that has led to the improvement of work. Later, when an account of the work is also needed, a journal provides a record, which can be cited.

Collaboration and critique in action research

During all the stages of the project, the participants need to be active. Participation, as Stringer (1999) asserted, is at its most effective when noticeable active involvement is encouraged. This is when participants are able to acquire self-learning, when plans and activities accomplished by people are strengthened, and when people are dealt with directly rather than indirectly through representatives.

In Schon's (1987) view, the practical actions of individuals and groups in action research requires criticality by those who are qualified and have main roles in the practice being researched. This means that the context in which the research takes place and researcher's own performance have to be critically self-reflected. Schon (1987) further stated that the involvement of participants in reflective practice in action research will lead to technical change and inform decision-making that will change their understanding and the results of their actions.

Key features of participatory action research

According to Dewey (1933), participatory action research is a scientific and reflective method where experience and intelligent action are connected in a cycle. The main feature that action research is known by is the spiral cycle of self-reflection. It is believed that self-reflection on actions that lead to change caused by group planning and that reflection on observations can

increase participants' feeling of having control over their work. Glassman and Erdem (2014) explained that participatory action research's evolution in the developing world was through a bottom-up process.

In Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) view, participatory action research has seven key features. The first feature is that participatory action research is a social process. Drawing on Habermas (1994) Kemmis and McTaggart explained that the intention of participatory action research is that it investigates the relationship between the domain of the individual and the social, realising that individuation and socialisation are interrelated. In participatory action research, participants in relation to one another try to find out how they as individuals are formed and reformed in education and community development settings.

The second feature is that participatory action research is participatory, meaning it involves participants in evaluating their knowledge and the way they understand and interpret themselves. It is a process in which people understand the way knowledge forms their identity and agency and how it frames their actions. In addition, it is considered participatory as action research can only be done on oneself, individually or in a group but cannot be done on another participant.

Thirdly, participatory action research is practical and collaborative, as it explores the social practices that connect them with others in social interactions. As an integral part of this process, participants examine their exercise of communication, production, and social organisation in order to find the acts that are involved and try to improve them. As a result they are therefore reconstructing their social interactions.

Fourthly, participatory action research has a strong emancipatory purpose. This means that PAR intends to assist people in recovering, and releasing themselves from "the constraints of irrational, unproductive, unjust, and unsatisfying social structures" that restrict their self-development and self-determination and how their actions are made and shaped by greater social structures.

The fifth point is that participatory action research is critical. The goal of PAR is to assist people in recovering and freeing themselves from the constraints that is included in social media and is used for interaction in discourse, types of work, and power relationships.

The sixth feature of participatory action research is its reflexivity, which means its goal, as Borda (1979) explained, is to research reality with the aim of changing it, and changing reality

with the aim of studying it. In this process, people intentionally aim to transform their practices with the use of cycles of critical and self-critical action and reflection.

Lastly, participatory action research has a goal of transforming theory and practice. Within participatory action research, neither one has superiority over the other. The aim in participatory action research is to develop theory and practice in relation to each other through a critical reasoning process that examines their consequences. Participatory action research involves an intention to change the theories and practices of the participants, policy makers, and decision makers whose perspectives and decisions will influence life conditions in immediate settings, and aims to connect local and global settings.

While my part, as doctoral researcher, within the current study could be described in terms of action research, the explorations of the participants into their problems with and understandings of academic writing involve active engagement with both their understandings of theories and their actual practices and are directed towards changing their situation in their immediate setting. The studies reviewed above, therefore, have strongly informed my understandings of the purpose as well as the nature of participatory action research.

Researcher's participation in action research

Action research needs people who are close to the situation investigated. Therefore, Kemmis (2012) argued that in the spiral process of action research, the researcher is not placed away from the research, but rather is inside and plays an internal role with the participants rather than just being a facilitator or a manager. According to Kemmis and McTaggart (2005), while the term *facilitator* might seem to carry the connotation of neutrality, neutrality is not possible or even desirable in action research. Being an insider, a researcher who carries the role of a facilitator would struggle to be neutral or not to influence, as the purpose is to alter the situation or bring about change.

Cardno (2003) stated that a researcher may have to also take on the role of a facilitator, especially when dealing with an organisation of practitioners where there is an issue that needs change or improvement, and by facilitating said researcher can help them to take collaborative action to change practice.

Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) explained that the role of the facilitator is to cooperate with others to understand both the source and different aspects of the problem that need to be

investigated. Under these circumstances, being a facilitator can help in leading and co-ordinating a project and thus in supporting participants who may need help.

Action and praxis in participatory action research

It is stated by Glassman and Erdem (2014) that praxis consists of dynamism and change, reshaping of ideas into action, an act of engagement, exercise and practice of ideas. They explained that the notion of praxis used in participatory action research is derived from Freire's (1973) definition which states that praxis is acting on conditions faced to make changes and includes critical reflection in order to bring about awareness of the process and aims.

Glassman and Erdem (2014) stated that the focus of praxis is on actions that individuals take to produce activity and on the way possibilities and capabilities that lead to success and control in the course of life are restricted. They considered action as praxis that requires continuous reflection and dialogue, which changes in order for the individuals to engage between the desires they have and the survival strategies they use, while no predetermined plan or strategy exists for these negotiations. They maintain that participatory action research's goal is not so much to change action trajectories of individuals or groups, but rather to provide an opportunity for the oppressed to constantly criticise their own actions. They further explained that praxis provides an opportunity for the oppressed to overcome their condition by criticising, problematising, and claiming.

The process of research in participatory action research, as Glassman and Erdem (2014) reflected, is a consistent cycle of exploration and understanding through action. Glassman and Erdem (2014) stated that there is no end to the process of education and intervention. Every time there is a reflection, aside from possibilities for change, problems and difficulties that had been unnoticed until then, arise. Furthermore, when change is made based on reflections, the community itself is affected and reflection is needed again.

The concept of praxis is very relevant to my study as a core expectation of the study is that participants will take responsibility for exploring their academic writing problems and take action to overcome them. I understand this as a form of praxis.

The literature reviewed above provides a theoretical platform on which my research question was based. The gap that I saw in the literature was for studies that look at learning communities for doctoral students. The literature signified an increase in the number of international students in western universities, such as in New Zealand (Greenwood, 2014). However, Heng and

Abdullah (2006) emphasised that not many studies have been done in New Zealand. This increase in number of students also aligned with the rise of challenges faced by them in academic writing, such as writing development. My study used approaches that were seen as important for the New Zealand's education system. Participatory action research was significantly important in this study and it aligns with the Ministry of Education's (2020) encouragement of the use of this process. The research also studied students' agency in learning, which New Zealand's Education Hub (2019) had signified as importance. The following chapter presents a collage of accounts of how the project that arose from that research question was played out.

Chapter Four: Accounts of the project: participants' stories and reports of sessions

Introduction

This research study involves an investigation of both a process – that of holding meetings with a group that I hoped would evolve into a learning community - and participants' experiences of the process. As a researcher, I ask the question about the ways in which participation in a learning community can help international doctoral students exercise agency and learn collaboratively in order to improve their academic writing. I recognise that agency, collaborative learning and improvement are all subjective concepts and, taking a phenomenological approach, I seek to report what happened in terms of the various participants' perceptions of their experiences. To this end, I have developed a series of narratives. A separate narrative has been developed for each of the student participants who came to a series of sessions, for the facilitators and for myself. A combined and summative account is offered of those who attended only one or two sessions. In addition to these narratives, I have selected an initial episode and five of the sessions to report the proceedings. In this way, I seek to show elements of the flow of the project as well as detailing participants' various impressions and experiences.

I have arranged the narratives and the reported sessions as a collage, in order to capture some of the multiplicity of views and experiences that constitute the workings of a learning community. Some material that is deliberately repeated in several participants' accounts and perhaps in some of the reports of sessions. Such repetition illustrates how different people viewed the same event. I have also included my reflections on both the narratives and the accounts of session reports, but I am careful to clearly mark my reflections so that I do not blur the stories of individual participants.

The collage is made up of the following sections:

- 4a. Before starting the project: the first cycles of action research
- 4b. Report on the First Session
- 4c. Ahmad's Story
- 4d. Farzaneh's Story
- 4e. Mona's Story
- 4e. The Fourth Session

- 4f. Angy's Story
- 4g. Majid's Story
- 4h. Vida's Story
- 4i. Maria's Story
- 4j. The Seventh Session
- 4k. The other participants
- 4l. The Eighth Session
- 4m. Jess's Story
- 4n. The Eleventh Session
- 4o. Kate's Story
- 4p. My Story

4a. Before starting the project: the first cycles of action research

Although I did not plan it that way, the first action research cycles began while I was preparing for the project, in particular at the same time as I sought ethical approval. The University Ethics Committee asked for several modifications to my intended project and to the communications I planned to have with potential participants. In each case, I developed a plan using the advice of my supervisors and my readings of relevant literature, acted by presenting my proposed project to the committee, received their feedback, which I then shared and debated with my supervisors, and, after further reading and further negotiations, I developed a further revised plan.

First application

I acknowledge my first plan was somewhat hazy. I was new to qualitative research and although I read diligently about how participatory action research and learning communities work, I still had no practical experience. So the first feedback I received demanded for more clarity. The committee wanted a more structured and fixed plan for the study. The committee asked for firm specification of the duration of each session, the intended number of sessions, the number of interviews and duration of each, whether these interviews were to be individual or group, the physical location of the learning community and interviews, and the number of people in each session. In addition, I was asked to provide specific interview questions. I understood their duty of care for participants but such a fixed plan seemed to be contrary to the evolving nature of action research. This forced me to think harder and read further. On the one hand, I wanted to comply to the committee's requirement so that I could begin to recruit participants; on the other hand, I knew I had to explain my approach better; especially my reasons for wanting to keep the development of the sessions, and the consequent interviews, more open. I cited from some of the theorists I consulted in my next version of the application. The ethics committee again asked for further clarification and some further revisions. This, however, was not the only concern of the ethics committee.

Promises and liability

Although the committee seemed to accept a degree of open-endedness in my planning, they were concerned that the university should not be held liable for the material provided in the sessions or that participants should not be promised that they would be taught to write better. From the start, I had envisaged the community as a sharing space rather than a teaching space,

but I realised I needed to be more specific in the information letter I had drafted to participants. I added:

This is an informal learning community and does not replace the academic skill centre or other university facilities for advice on academic writing. No advice will be given to you on the content and structure of your thesis though you may bring a part of your academic writing and discuss it with the learning community. For advice on your thesis, you will rely on your supervisors and can get help from the academic skill centre.

It is noteworthy that the tension between teaching and sharing was one that recurred in many participants' reactions throughout the study.

The recruitment of participants was another concern raised by the committee. I was asked to change my initial proposal to use a snowball technique in order to ensure that people were not obliged to take part and participation was entirely voluntary. The committee stated that an open call should be made through departmental emails and information sheets that can be passed on to any interested in the study. Consequently, I undertook that all postgraduate students would be informed about the study through their administrators. I then submitted the application second time.

Again, it is noteworthy that while departmental administrators did email all doctoral students, most of those following up the notice were in fact Iranian students, and those in my department whom I knew personally. Although I did not shoulder tap them, they did attend from a mixture of interest and personal goodwill. One consequence of open advertisement rather than personal invitation was that it was an eclectic group that came together for the first meeting, with no previous experience of working together and only a superficial understanding, based on one written information sheet, of how we might work within the group. In reflection, I realise that all grounded action research projects operate within lived contexts where changes in direction occur not only because of careful planning, but also because of external constraints. I further discuss the nature of the group in Chapter Five.

The ethics committee then again asked for further clarifications and some further revisions.

Roles, facilitation, and power

My role was one that committee saw as problematic. Initially I hoped to study a community my supervisor led, but that was not approved by the ethics committee. I then considered leading it myself and I positioned myself as researcher and participant and formal facilitator of the

group, although I planned to bring in visiting ‘experts’ in the field of academic writing, including my own supervisor. I was able to draw on the work of Kemmis and McTaggart (2005), and Bergold and Thomas (2012) to clarify the researcher’s potentially active engagement within a participatory action research project, citing Bergold and Thomas’s statement that “objectivity and neutrality must be replaced by reflective subjectivity” (p.202). I then needed to carefully re-consider the role of facilitator. I had previously been informed that it was not considered appropriate to have my supervisor as the key facilitator in case the power relationship between us slanted my data collection and findings. I was also very aware that while I could organise meeting times, I did not have strong facilitation skills and I was myself also a learner in the field of academic writing. I recognised a skilled facilitator was needed for a learning community to evolve. I sought advice from my supervisors. Through their intercession, a colleague from an Australian university, who has worked extensively with doctoral learning communities and is a language and literacy specialist, agreed to lead the facilitation if she could do so online. I amended my proposal accordingly and added that my supervisor would take the support role of assistant co-facilitator. As the result of the changes, the committee then approved my application. (The letter of approval is attached in Appendix.)

From the point of view of what I had planned, the arrangement had real advantages and an apparent disadvantage. The disadvantage was that the lead facilitator would be online rather than physically present in the room. However, by the time the approval came though it had become apparent that my supervisor would be off campus for family reasons and she too would need to join the group online, and so at least would one of the potential participants.

In hindsight and having had to complete my thesis in the post-Covid-19 period, I now reflect that working online has been useful in highlighting both potentials and problems working in this mode, if needed in future situations. The main advantage was that I could be confident that our group included, in the role of facilitators, two people who had previously developed learning communities and who had plentiful experience in helping international students with their academic writing. That meant, I reflected, that participants could gain something from the process and would not just be subjects for my research. It also lessened the fear I had felt about conducting the project. On the other hand, I felt very nervous about working with two experienced professors and showing my lack of knowledge and experience.

The arrangement also forced me to become aware of and critically consider issues of power. I was forced to read more about roles, influence and power in action research. I became aware

that in many cases not all participants would have equal power in a participatory action research project (Brydon-Miller et al., 2011; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; Zuber-Skerritt, 1992). I realised that the important thing was to note critically the impact, positive and negative, of power. This is further discussed in some of the narratives and in Chapter Five.

Importance of these first cycles

Although my project had not yet begun, I am suggesting that the process of gaining ethical approval can be usefully seen as the first cycles of action research. I was involved in a series of planning, acting, reflecting and reworking that both affected the shape of my project and increased my knowledge of action research and learning communities. At this stage, my knowledge, while growing, was almost entirely theoretical and it is only in hindsight that I realise I was practically already engaging in a form of action research.

At this stage, it was my action research. In the final cycle of this stage it began to have participatory elements as first my supervisor, Professor Jess, and then the invited lead facilitator, Professor Kate, joined me in exploring ways to overcome problems and began to talk with me about the ways we could work together. As the project began and developed, it became increasingly participatory between the three of us. In the following sections, I detail and discuss the nature of the participatory roles the student participants took and the ways these affected the evolution of the community.

4b. The First Session

In the first session, the participants introduced themselves and their fields of study. Then they turned expectantly to me. I felt a bit nervous about the responsibility. I gave a presentation on the study and its purposes. In the information sheet and subsequent emails, I had explained the purpose of the research but when the participants introduced themselves and talked about the reason for joining the learning community, I realised that they were not really familiar with the purpose of the study. I wanted them to understand where the learning community was heading. After that, Professors Kate and Jess also talked about the study, its purposes, and benefits for the students. They indicated their role and my role and how we would be participating. Professor Kate explained:

The way I see this project is that all of us are experts, but at the same time all of us have roles in the way we work on academic writing.

The facilitators emphasised the role of the students both as individuals and as part of a learning community. They noted that the participants might hesitate to talk about their difficulties in academic writing as it could be seen as a face threatening act. Professor Jess acknowledged:

It takes a bit of courage to admit publically to specific difficulties.

They talked about their own experiences in struggling with writing. Both facilitators talked about the writing difficulties they had had during their PhD studies as native speakers of English. Professor Kate confessed:

I'm a native speaker of English and there are things about writing sometimes that I find really hard and some that I find really easy.

In addition, the facilitators talked about the difficulties and struggles they had noticed during their supervision of students. They asked the participants to share some specific aspects of writing that bothered them.

Several participants identified a few of their academic writing difficulties. Writer's block was mentioned more than once. Maria reflected:

Maybe because I was so perfectionist and I tried to find the best words and grammar, it just stopped me from writing.

Others talked about struggling to start sentences, difficulties with synonyms and using appropriate vocabulary.

Participants also shared expectations. Angy said she wanted feedback because improving her academic writing was a critical part of her planned future career as a lecturer. She added:

I'm here, putting myself in all the trouble of conducting this Ph.D. because I really want to dedicate the next ten years of my life to producing, to writing, and that means I need to really work on that.

Diba, having reached the end of her study journey, reflected that a PhD is a lonely process. She said:

During your PhD because it is kind of a lonely process, you think you are the only person who has these problems, such kind of issues.

The learning community, she hoped, would provide a chance for PhD students to talk to one another about academic writing and to realise that they are not the only ones with writing problems:

Other people have similar issues and talking about them kind of helps you to realise yourself - and you get a kind of a self-confidence - that nothing is wrong with you.

The initial issues and problems mentioned were broad and general, so the facilitators tried to encourage the participants to move to specifics. They suggested that the participants could bring parts of their writings to share in the next session for feedback, and perhaps comments from their supervisors.

As I reflect on the session, I think it was perhaps predictable that the participants would talk in very general terms as they did not yet know each other and had not yet had opportunity to develop trust. They did not yet know what to expect from the group and perhaps they did not yet know what their specific writing problems were. It was important, I realise, that the facilitators encouraged the participants to talk to their supervisors about their academic writing. Not only could the supervisors help students to identify problems, but it would also encourage students to take advice from the group back to their supervisors.

Immediately after the session, the facilitators and I held a debrief.

I acknowledged that during the session I came to understand the difficulty of setting up and developing a learning community. It was difficult to get participants talking and sharing. I realised that some of the participants had not really read the information sheet and email and so had no idea about what to expect. I also became aware that perhaps I had developed a shallow view of how the participants would engage and I wondered if they were fully aware of their writing problems. I suggested they did not feel comfortable enough to talk about negative aspects of their work:

I felt they all had their defence shields held up high, they were unsure of what was going on, though I had explained to them in the emails, information sheet, consent form, and even in person.

It was noted how different the students' backgrounds, fields of study and stages of progress were. Professor Kate said:

My feeling is that we're seeing diversity – different students with different topics at different stages of the doctoral journey, a range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Professor Jess said she thought the acknowledgement of being lonely during PhD studies was significant and the learning community could provide the participants a chance to have peer support:

I think perhaps it indicates that PhD study is really lonely and that the participants were very glad to find opportunity to share their experiences and find some solidarity.

In addition, Professor Jess noted that the issues mentioned during the session were not about specific aspects of academic writing, and that participants talked about their problems in broad, rather safe, terms:

I thought that most of the participants, apart from Diba, spoke in broad generalities.

Professor Kate agreed that most of the issues mentioned were on general issues, but expressed confidence that as the study proceeded and participants' understandings grew, they would get more into the specifics of academic writing and the group would develop into a learning community. She said:

Perhaps there are things that are still hidden at the moment, but there was significant sharing anyway. They have a shared interest, however broad and unstructured that might be. Yet they also have their own research topics and these are rather varied.

Professor Kate acknowledged one drawback in facilitating virtually was that not giving her the ability to clearly see all the participants' faces and understand their feelings through their reactions:

I am now thinking that the medium for communication - Zoom – probably has some disadvantages. I obviously missed some of the signs that Mir noticed in the face-to-face situation.

The facilitators asked me to email and try to encourage the students into writing journals:

Email them and tell them that you are keeping a journal and you're wondering if they are as well.

They suggested that I tell participants that they do not have to share the journal unless they want to.

As I now reflect, I appreciate that the first session was stressful as I was experiencing something that I had not done before and was not confident about. I have also become aware of the importance of trust within the group. I was already developing trust with the facilitators, but the student members of the group had not yet had the chance to get to know each other and be comfortable with each other.

At a personal level, I came to understand that I was not alone in my PhD journey and there were many others who were facing difficulty in regards to academic writing. So having to listen to others talk about their writing challenges helped me increase my self-confidence.

After the debrief I wrote in my reflective journal that, despite the generality of the discussion, the session had turned out to be better than I had expected due to the facilitator's provocation of the participants into sharing and discussing:

Back and forth, communication between the facilitators and the participants really helped, and the fact that the facilitators provided examples made the participants feel like they were on their side.

However, I also noted that not everyone got an equal opportunity to talk and share. Perhaps this was because of their individual personalities or perhaps it was because of how we organised the group and particularly because of the use of Zoom to bring in the facilitators. I realised I would need to be more active within the following sessions to ensure everyone got to speak.

In terms of action research, this first session was the first major action that I hoped would be participatory. Many of the students who came did participate in talking, although with varying degrees of reserve. At this stage however, the critique and further planning was still between the facilitators and me. I did hope that by writing journals the participants would begin a process of action research into their own writing, noting their difficulties and planning strategies to improve.

4c. Ahmad's Story

Introducing Ahmad

Ahmad is a PhD candidate at the University of Canterbury studying Education, in the third year of his doctorate and nearing the end of his studies. An English language teacher, he has taught in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and in New Zealand.

Ahmad is not just a colleague at the university, but also a colleague at the various institutions where we had taught English. We also share the challenge of working on unfamiliar ground. "I'm a novice qualitative researcher and my earlier background was quantitative," said Ahmad, "and here I'm trying to do a qualitative research." This shared background gave us an empathetic understanding of each other's projects and challenges. One of the challenges that we both met was finding participants for our studies. Ahmad's study required ESOL teachers and he had approached me as a potential participant. I accepted being a part of his study, although I did not end up being one of his case studies. When I sought participants for my study, Ahmad showed interest and decided to join the learning community. He recalled:

When I first joined this learning community, it was me doing Mir a favour actually and I came to his learning community so there are people there. This was actually my intention when I first came here.

Because he is Muslim as I am too, he has a brotherly attitude with a feeling of responsibility towards me. One of the factors of being a good Muslim is to help out another being when they are in need. As he once said, "I do not have three kids; I have four kids including Mir." At another time he stated, "Though we are from different sectors of Islam (Sunni and Shia), I feel closer to him as a friend". So, considering me as part of family, he wanted to help out my study by participating.

Ahmad acknowledged he also had another reason for joining the group. As a researcher in an aligned field, he was curious to find out how my study was carried out. In a final interview he stated, "I joined the learning community out of curiosity. I just wanted to know what is happening there". Participating in one another's research would not only help each of us out in our projects, but also give us a better understanding of the other person's work.

Development of academic writing skills

Ahmad explained that as he had considerable experience in teaching English, he attended the sessions to support and to share his knowledge with others where it was needed, as he considered his language abilities were at an acceptable level. As he initially saw it, Ahmed was not expecting to learn. He thought the problems discussed would be at the level of language correction and he did not feel he had many issues in this area and he could solve the issues he had on his own. By the end of the project, he thought differently:

I felt like what we would discuss was on the level of language correction, and I don't think I have very big problems with language issues and even if I have some - because none of us is complete - when I revisit it, I can identify and correct it.

I thought that my language is okay so I might not need to learn a lot from this learning community but I want to say today and after attending some sessions, every day I leave here with something in hand, something tangible I would say, something that I learn about academic writing.

As the sessions progressed, Ahmad raised the problem he had with what he called clichés in his writing.

I use clichés in my writing. We have learned English as second language learners in other countries: this is part of it. One comment [from my supervisors] is that I was always using - this type of thing I do not know if it has a linguistic term - when there is one word that is attached to everything you write, you always repeat one word. Like, *in order to*, *for the reason that*, you get this string of words repeated a lot in your writing.

In a following session, Ahmad referred back to this problem and stated that recognition of this habit allowed him to stop using such phrases. He added that his elimination was not immediate, rather it was gradual, although he still sometimes reverts unconsciously. However, he noted:

I'm saying *eliminating* because I was not able to fully eliminate it, but I realised that I'm using it much less than before.

At another time, he talked about using phrases that implied something was an established fact that everyone knew about. He explained:

I notice I've been criticised by using phrases like *there is no doubt that*, *everybody agrees that*, *it has been proved that*. Issues or general facts assuming that they are established

facts and everyone knows about them. I do realise that this is something that I need to avoid when I come to academic writing. I understand that it has to be proved through research that somebody said that or you have to mention a name.

Others in the group acknowledged they had the same kind of problem and a wider discussion about referencing opened up. This discussion is detailed later in this chapter.

At one stage, Ahmad reflected about why second language learners have problems with academic English. He said:

I think one big reason is that we haven't acquired such a thing in our first language because I would assume most of the people around this table haven't written academically in their first language so they haven't acquired these things in their first language. So when we need to acquire it in a second language, sometimes we read about it, we discuss it, we talk about it, but when we come to write we get back to our own habits of doing these things.

He noted that for many international students their doctoral study in New Zealand was the first time they had to organise their ideas in a rigorous academic way. The challenge, he argued, was to understand academic conventions and expectations, not just to use the correct forms of English language. His observation is particularly interesting because most of what he contributed to and, it seems, gained from, the learning community was discussion of the expectations in academic writing about recording of data, organisation of ideas, development of a sequential argument throughout chapters, and the scope for original thought and assertion of ideas.

The language of transcription

Ahmad raised an issue regarding transcribing. He wanted to know how he could deal with what looked like mistakes when the words were written down, and with the production of sentences that need clarification. He explained:

When you interview people who are not speaking the same language of your research, and they try to use English for example, you expect the language they are producing not to be top language. Sometimes they produce sentences that need clarification from your side. When I'm transcribing they are using a lot of *they do this*, and if I lift it like this maybe the reader won't understand *they*. Can I in brackets write students? Or kids? Next to that? Or that I'm not allowed to do so? Or can I interpret some of their grammar

mistakes and sentences. Like if they made one or two sentences which are incorrect in grammar and this affected the meaning. Can I interpret the meaning and say *she means this and that*, or *he means this and that*?

A discussion developed. Most of the science students said it was not a problem for them, but the Education and Humanities students reported their various understandings about whether the transcription had to be exact or that changes could be made. They turned to the facilitators, who led the discussion back to consideration of the study: were the linguistic features of the utterances the focus, or were the ideas? What was writer's intention in transcribing? If the intention is to convey ideas, it is possible to record the meaning of what was intended to make it understandable. But if the purpose was linguistic, exactly what was said should be written down. One of the facilitators added: "You have to explain, in your methodology, what you have done and why. You can do almost anything if you can explain why your decision is a good one".

Hedging and using tentative language

Ahmad also brought questions about *hedging* to the learning community. He reported that his supervisors had critiqued the amount of assertive, but unsubstantiated, statements that he made and said he should be more tentative. A discussion developed about the use of words, like *could*, *might* and *may*, that should be used in writing and whether there were chapters where they could be used more than others. Professor Kate suggested that in the literature review chapter, where there is reporting of other authors' findings, there is less need for tentative language, whereas when interpreting data, tentative language might be used to interpret what someone was stating or what you assume they were thinking from your observation. It was then suggested that the conclusion could become firmer in tone, arguing that your findings strongly indicate certain things. Both Professors Kate and Jess argued that the use of tentative language is dependent on the amount, complexity, and type of evidence provided, though interpretations may still have some tentative aspects.

Ahmad then questioned the relationship between methodology and tentative language, asking:

Does the methodology that I choose at the beginning affect the tentativeness of my conclusion or not?

The discussion then considered the kind of outcomes sought through the methodology: were they to be concrete or personalised and bounded by time and context? Professor Kate again

insisted that there should be enough evidence through data, analysis, and literature that would allow the researcher to make a solid claim. Professor Jess added that if the researcher is still investigating the issue and wants others to acknowledge this fact, more tentative language might be involved. The discussion then turned to how a student could know when they could talk with authority.

Ahmad returned to questions of evidence and authority in the last session when Mona tabled some of her writing for feedback. Ahmad suggested that Mona had not developed her ideas well enough and this was a difficulty he shared. He said:

However she gave very little information and this is what most of us do by the way, I do this as well. I got a feeling that this is understood so why do I spend more time explaining it? I got a feeling that things can be a common sense so I expect my reader to understand it without much effort from my side.

He then described a strategy he used to try to overcome the problem:

Sometimes I say to myself okay forget about me writing, and I try to read other people's works, like published articles or books and I see how much time do they give to explain and give definitions and give examples, just to illustrate and elaborate their ideas and then I say to myself I need to do a similar thing rather than I guarantee that whoever is going to read this is going to understand it easily. Maybe I just need to give it more of a- I'm thinking of a specific word. Like you put your idea and then you support it with something from literature and then you give an example from real life in relation to this thing and then you evaluate it from your own perspective.

He acknowledged this strategy raised his awareness but did not always succeed in explaining his ideas clearly.

Argument and chapter organisation

Ahmad raised an issue he faced with the order of the chapters in his thesis and the organisation of the content within them. He said he struggled to find the most suitable chapter that would have been relevant to particular material and ended mixing them up:

Sometimes after I finish it, I say this should appear in literature review more than anywhere else and this section can go to my methodology and feel like I'm kind of like mixing things to some extent.

In the past I used to go introduction, literature review, data collection, analysis, discussion, conclusion and it was straightforward with numbers, tables and everything. But now I'm kind of really confused like if I start with introduction, then literature review and then methodology can I dedicate one chapter for context? Or do I just include context in my introduction and that is it? Then when I go to the rest of my thesis how this is going to be designed?

After being assured by Professor Kate that qualitative research could vary in format, Ahmad explained that he wanted to add a new chapter to his thesis since he realised context played a big role in his study:

After [the] literature review I would like to add one separate chapter for context. I don't know how I can squeeze this into it because after I collected some data - in the middle of my data collection now I realise that context is big thing in relation to what I am looking at. So I want to dedicate one chapter but do you think this chapter can be included in the discussion as data?

Professor Kate suggested he could write his chapter first and later decide where to place it. Ahmad has since reported that this is what he has in fact done, and is now waiting to see if it should be a section of his methodology chapter or a separate one following it.

Ahmad also talked about the design of his methodology:

I got a feeling like I am kind of chained. I am kind of tired with this methodology that my professors want me to read about and to pour my ideas into a kind of theoretical framework and I got a feeling like I should go and write whatever I think and compare it to literature or at least express my ideas in a way that tells what I think about the area that I am searching.

Ahmad reported that he had felt constrained by his supervisors' advice that he should base his research methodology on theoretical frameworks. Being able to discuss it in the group allowed him to voice his frustration, especially with the facilitator who was also an academic but not part of his supervisory team. Professor Kate advised him that he could discuss his changing attitudes to theory as part of his data analysis. Ahmad reported that while he did not resolve his unease with established theory within the sessions of the learning community, just talking about them seemed to somehow free his mind and he later wrote his methodology chapter with greater confidence.

Listening to others and giving feedback

Ahmad joined the group intended to offer advice when other participants tabled problems, and although he did also state his own difficulties, he mainly participated in response to issues that other members raised.

For example, when Mona talked about difficulty in finding and using different words that can be used in a context, Ahmad related that he used the collocation dictionary. He said:

What I used to do in the past, and I'm still doing this all the time while I am writing, I have the collocation dictionary and the dictionary is open in the background of my work and every time I try to use a term like *migrant displacement*, and I'm not sure is it *displacement* or *moving* or *forcing*, I go to collocation dictionary and I check the collocation and check if this goes together or not.

One of the major sources of difficulties that international postgraduate students have according to Ahmad is being second language speakers of English. He said:

What I am saying here is that your job is much easier than ours because you've got your set [of alternative words] already there but we don't have this so we have to find a backup thing to help us doing this. So a collocation dictionary or a simple dictionary can be very helpful here.

In another session, several participants discussed excessive use of connecting words as a difficulty they faced. Ahmad stated:

A friend of mine said that it is a characteristic of non-native speaker's language that they are using these connecting words: *however*, *although*. You write a sentence and in order to start another sentence, you add *furthermore*, *in addition to that*. So a friend of mine said that native speakers don't write like this normally, they write less than you do.

He then suggested that such repetitive use of linking words may have two reasons:

When I look at this I look at it in two different levels. One level is lack of knowledge: what are the other alternatives. The other level is sometimes this sticks in our minds.

At one point, Ahmad stated that he came to the sessions with the attitude that he needed to put his own needs aside:

I didn't get the chance to impose my needs on the whole group because they have different needs and they seem in a much more need than my situation, like they seem in a more immediate need than myself. So, I decided to put my need aside and start looking at their needs.

However, he found that just hearing other people's difficulties brought him new insights. Apart from giving feedback to others he also learned from them. Through listening to other perspectives, Ahmad began to look at the issues in his work more critically. He offered an example:

Like the use of clichés at times and sometimes nominalisation. Like you start your sentence with noun phrases rather than starting them with nouns. I didn't realise that I need to learn more about it until I saw other students having problems.

Discussions within the group led Ahmad to address not only his own writing, but also his teaching:

So coincidentally, it was also - where I teach I need to teach my students how to use more nominalisation in their writing. So it came together for me. This is the problem of writing that I didn't know that I have to use, then I'm using it. I'm not using it that much but I'm aware of at least its importance.

Another learning area for Ahmad was the way language issues faced by his fellow participants in the learning community were shared by his own students as were their ways of talking about their work. He explained:

When it comes to vocabulary or grammar things, it was okay. However, there were some points that I was unaware of until I came here and saw other students talking about them. I've learnt about the language problems that the students we work with in ESOL can have by listening to what your participants say about language issues. That was a very big question for me.

Another area of learning for Ahmad was his growing understanding of research design. He recalled:

So the way they started raising questions and that I started figuring out answers for their questions helped me to figure out questions for myself that didn't make me perfect but at least switched my way of looking at the research design of my study.

And then we moved to *listen it depends on the design of your study, it could be a case study, it could be a phenomenology*. Then I said to myself: yeah, I've been trying to look at phenomenology but if it is a case study it should be a different way of looking at things.

Ahmad considers himself as a novice qualitative researcher, so through figuring out answers for the questions that were raised in the learning community, he started solving his own questions. The issues others raised made him rethink his design, especially when there were discussions about case study and phenomenology. This made him look more critically at methodology in general and in return, he came to a deeper understanding of his methodology. He recounted that although not all his issues were answered, it made him view his research design from another perspective.

One learning that Ahmad found he shared with other participants was that he was not alone in his difficulties. He recounted:

I was happy to know that I'm not alone. It wasn't only me who has problems with these things, it was other people as well. Sometimes it's a kind of a relief, like yeah let's work on this: it's a problem.

Being in the learning community and hearing others express and share their writing difficulties, made many of the participants aware that they were not the only ones in the journey of having to deal with problems in academic writing. Ahmad reported that coming to realise he was not alone gave him a feeling of relief and motivated him to work on his difficulties.

As I look back at Ahmad's account, I reflect that learning through other people's discussion of their problems is an interesting feature of what happens in a learning community, and I wondered if people might sometimes be more critical of their own work if they felt the focus is not on them.

Learning about learning

In our final interview Ahmad recounted that, as a teacher, being in the learning community helped him understand learning. He said:

It's not only learning about teaching but also learning about learning itself because my study - a lot of it - is based on adults' learning and I would say watching other people reflecting on the learning and talking about their learning enriched my knowledge and understanding about learning. It added to my personal understanding of how people do

learn because my own experience is something and looking or watching others' experience is something different. So it helped me both ways. One related to my classroom and one related to my own learning journey as a postgraduate student as well.

Ahmad reflected that in order for teachers to be able to teach with a deeper understanding of learning, it is good for them to watch others learn and as a result learn about learning itself. He reported that as a teacher he wants his students to learn and tries to find better ways of teaching his students. In the learning community, he no longer had the role of a teacher who gives instruction and expects students to learn, rather he and his colleagues were all learning. He reflected that by being in a learning community you can observe others' learning without the pressure of feeling you are responsible for it. Changing perspective helped him realise how people learn. In turn, this not only helped him in his teaching but learning about the learning process itself, enriched his knowledge and understanding. He explained:

We were able to learn because we were able to come here and leave with information and leave with knowledge in a kind of very comfortable and friendly atmosphere rather than coming and feeling that I'm sitting with this professor so I have to choose my words, I have to watch what I am saying. No, we were really comfortable and spontaneous about what we are saying. We have learnt a lot so that means we've achieved the purpose of this and at the same time managed to take out the negative element.

As I reflect on Ahmad's account, I think about the ways that learning within a learning community is different from others forms of learning, such as attending tutorials, reading books or going to the academic skill centre. A learning community provides a place within the university where students can gather by choice and discuss their academic writing issues without fear of saying the wrong thing and where they might learn without really planning to.

Looking at other's learning helped Ahmad in various ways. One way was in understanding learning that he could use in his teaching. Another way was in helping him understand the subject of his research study. Ahmad's study is based on adult learning and the reflection of the group participants on their learning increased and deepened his knowledge of learning. Further, understanding learning helped him to get a better understanding of his own learning processes.

Thoughts about supervisors and about culture

At various times within the discussions, Ahmad shared thoughts about how he relates to supervisors and how this might be influenced by his culture. He pointed out that he came from Egypt, a Middle Eastern country with a culture that has high respect for elders. When Professor Kate picked up a couple of dishes at the end of the workshop session he stopped her, saying:

In my culture I wouldn't allow my supervisor or I would go further and say my elder sister to do this in front of me. I do it but you don't do it.

He acknowledged that traditionally his culture made it difficult to argue or disagree with those who he regarded as elder and superior: it led him rather to sit quietly and respectfully in their presence, listening rather than initiating talk. However, in the last session he stated that, although he saw both facilitators in the group as experts, he felt comfortable sharing his ideas in their presence. He said:

Maybe it is your personality.

He explained that an atmosphere had been created that made it easy to talk and share.

As I consider his account, I reflect that it might have been expected that cultural factors would make it difficult for Ahmad to be outspoken about his opinions in front of the facilitators and to share his difficulties, but the opposite occurred. Due to the way the facilitators engaged with the members of the learning community, Ahmad felt at ease to share and participate.

At another time in the sessions, Ahmad argued against the suggestion that academics in Asian and Middle Eastern countries are afraid to lose face by admitting they are wrong. He argued that in his experience, scholars may become gurus in the eye of the people, but they do not consider themselves as gurus. He contended:

I have met many scholars here and everywhere. The last thing you can tell that they try to say *I know everything*. They always say *I know* and *I don't know*. However, other people around them could look at them and say *he is a guru, he knows everything if you have any problem with education and kid's education go to this person*.

He argued that as scholars begin to learn more, they acknowledge the fact that they do not know everything. Referring specifically to Egypt, Ahmad maintained that there may be those who believe that the only way to success is through their pathway, but that a majority are open to different views. He stated:

It depends. There is some of this also in Egypt like those people as you said had become a doctor through these fifteen steps and say this is the only way. But there is also a large number of people who are open and they accept.

Ahmad argued that while many believed that Middle Eastern and Asian cultures were not open to new and different beliefs, that this was a racially slanted assumption.

Ahmad's various comments about respect, personality and differences in attitude lead me to reflect that, while culture may play a significant part in how willing international students are to acknowledge problems and voice their opinions, assumptions should not be too quickly made about the effects of culture.

Overall feeling about the community

Although Ahmad initially attended the group to do me a favour and help others in their writing, he acknowledged that enjoyed the sessions. He stated:

I would say it's a healthy atmosphere for people to learn to reflect on their learning.

He noticed the lack of tension in the group and the way participants comfortably shared their ideas:

The people there in the learning community themselves, I think they were relaxed, they didn't have any tension or they didn't show it at least and the presence of Jess and Kate gave us this kind of immediate feedback on things that we have different opinions on. Like we can have different opinions on one thing, they get into the discussion and tell us, I think this is right, I think this is also possible, all these things.

He identified absence of judgement by the facilitators, and therefore by others, as an important factor:

People feel like they are free to share whatever ideas or to ask whatever questions they want. It doesn't matter if it is a silly question because you know people won't judge you and this is an area I like about learning communities.

On the other hand, Ahmad felt stress and pressure from his study. He reflected on the way timing might affect things:

If we are not under a lot of stress of work and our own studies that could be much better. If these sessions can happen at the beginning of students joining the university, like in

the first two months possibly, I think at this time we were not as much stressed as we are now in my stage. If it is earlier, it could be better.

When asked if the learning community met his needs, Ahmad returned an ambivalent answer. On the one hand, he said, he did not feel he had the opportunity to raise many of his own problems.

If you say were my needs met, I would say not fully, because I had other needs that were not on the table.

What I needed help with was the technical areas of writing thesis and because of the time frame that we had we didn't reach this level. That's what I felt, so that's why I didn't share some of my work, I felt like it's not going to help that much if I share them at this stage. Possibly if we continued more or if we had a learning agenda, like this month we are going to discuss this and that, next month we are going to discuss this and that, there could be some chance for me to fit in some of my work.

Possibly, if our learning community continued more we could have all of us talked about NVIVO for example.

Ahmad explained that he felt that the needs of the participants differed from his own needs, and also, as he wanted to give other people chance to raise their issues, there was no time to elaborate on his.

On the other hand, Ahmad acknowledged that one of the benefits in the learning community was that instead of going just with your question, there you were able to listen to other people's issues which could give you new perspectives. He stated:

To an extent as I told you, when I saw other people's issues with language and proofreading and correction and these things, in one way or another that guided my work while I was doing my corrections. The advice that has been given by the members of the community, some of them also helped me with my editing.

He also acknowledged he enjoyed and learned from the way that participants felt comfortable expressing their difficulties openly:

People feel like they are free to share whatever ideas or to ask whatever questions they want. It doesn't matter if it is a silly question because you know people won't judge you.

Maybe you're sitting with your supervisor or other colleagues in a formal discussion, you wouldn't ask questions that you might feel like people would laugh at.

The value of sharing work in his view was that it encouraged greater criticality:

Normally when you visit your work, you visit it with the impression that I have done everything right. So if you revisit it after some time you might come up with few mistakes, but if somebody else looked at your work that gives you much digging into your work.

Observing others reflect on their work and receive feedback was something he found helpful:

Looking at, observing, watching or let us say sharing other people's learning experiences - that was a very good thing. Again it added to my understanding of adults' learning. In addition to that, I learnt how to reflect on my work because I see people reflecting on their work. And I learnt how I can reflect on my work capturing things that I haven't even used to look at before.

I saw other students' confusion about their methodology, in a way or another that clarifies a lot of my questions about my own methodology.

I learned from advice given by Jess and Kate as well.

Suggestions for further action

Although Ahmad attended most of the sessions, when there was a discussion about whether any participants would like to continue to meet after the project finished, he was one who said he would not. He explained it was difficult for him to continue his participation because he was nearing the end of his studies and the pressure to finish his work limited his available time:

My answer to this question is no. Like the situation I'm in now is totally different from my situation last year for example so if I had been asked the same question last year or the year before I would say definitely I would love to come. If this learning community is going to have an extension, after I finish my study I will come and visit them.

Nevertheless, he strongly recommended that the university should take the initiative to set up learning communities and made a number of recommendations about how they should be organised. He explained:

It needs to be university facilitated. The university would study people's needs, PhD students' needs, and decide the priorities for their learning and form groups of students based on this so it is always started by studying students' needs, talking to students, have communication with students about what do we need to learn. It has to start top down but it is based on bottom up at the beginning. Because the students don't get together until they see something happening like this learning community. We can't escape that the role or importance of university on the top of this because the university is one shared thing between everybody in this place.

Ahmad argued that while such initiatives needed to be university initiated, they should not be compulsory or overly directed. When challenged in discussion that a university-controlled initiative could become like just another set of classes, he further explicated:

The university sets it up facilities only, and then the learning and the aims and the outcome and even the evaluation of its outcome has to be done by the people themselves. Students get together, they learn from each other and then they reflect on this learning and then they decide if we want to move forward or get back again to the first step we started from.

It does not need to be compulsory, if the students feel like they own it since the beginning. I really believe in agency of it especially when it comes to adult learners because they can tell what they want and they can judge the outcome of it.

Nevertheless, Ahmad did suggest that there should be some structured organisational decisions. He suggested that students should come from the same field of study:

I would assume that if I have this learning community with purely Education students I think I would benefit more.

He explained that students from the same field would better understand one another's needs. He also noted differences in academic writing between different fields:

Like we reference differently, the way we look at methodology could be different. The way we look at even the structure of our thesis is different from the structure of their thesis.

He also suggested that different groups could be set up for students at each stage of their study:

Those who are in the last year come together, those who are at the proposal stage come together, those who are still writing their proposals come together and I think possibly they can have a lot to share. I think it would be a good idea if - I'm trying to imagine the university is organising these things now - if they want to have a taste of getting different levels together they can this once a month. But the basic idea is having them based on their study stage and then they can mix them once a month or so. This mixing and separating them lets them get the best of both worlds if it is going to work like this.

I know there is some literature saying that different levels can benefit from each other. I wouldn't say no for this but I would say they benefit more - in my own experience - they would benefit more if they are at the same level.

Ahmad also suggested there would be benefits in putting together students with the same research design:

I think if we tried to put people together from one research methodology. Like I'm doing a case study, who else is doing a case study?

However, he then voiced a hesitation:

But I don't know if this will turn it to a study group rather than a learning community.

He then modified this suggestion a little:

Or maybe this can be something that happens after the learning community, like people can get together and talk about their studies outside the time here.

Ahmad advocated a clearly planned structure for the learning community:

In a different scenario, different place, I would imagine that a pool of ideas or learning needs contributed from the people coming to the learning community are put into a list of needs, and then an agenda of sessions, like in this session they would discuss this and that topic.

The structure, he suggested, should be planned by the members but finalised by facilitators, arguing:

I don't want to go to that structure thing because I hate structured things but I believe that it could be done with more flexibility and participants' input rather than imposing something.

It was clear that Ahmad was brainstorming possibilities. On the one hand, he highlighted the importance of including some social dynamics:

I would say a little bit of social, like meeting new people and knowing people.

On the other hand, he argued for homogeneity of needs and interests:

We divide them into groups of three or two based on their stage and real needs and what do they exactly want, and then they can process and go ahead with their learning journey.

As I consider his account, I reflect that the practicality and benefits potential of his specific structural recommendations are perhaps less important than the overall recommendation that the university should find ways of supporting the development of learning communities. Ahmad's discussion of the shape of such groups is perhaps partly a reflection on the way he thinks that the group in the current project could have been more effective and partly evidence of his growing interest in advocating ways of facilitating self-driven learning. In the workshop session, he talked passionately about the importance of individual initiation and ownership of learning, of the relationship to collaboration and of the need for autonomous decision-making:

I have thought deeply about it before. Self-driven learning for me is not an individual action. It is a bottom up process. It is started by individual initiation and then implemented and enriched or nourished by collaborative acts.

When you own your learning it is totally different to when it is just imposed on you. That's why I'm looking at top down and bottom up all the time.

He further argued:

The difference here, these types of sessions are not led by a lecture, these types of sessions are led by learners themselves and they evaluate the outcome of it. I really believe in agency, especially when it comes to adult learners because they can tell what they want and they can judge the outcome of it.

For such agency to be able to come into operation, however, Ahmad argued that it is important for the university to take the first initiative:

Because the students don't get together until they see something happening like this learning community, I wouldn't have known the other students before we were invited to come here initially.

The university acting as an agent in initiating this thing provides facilities that can allow students to get together.

Ahmad suggested that the university could use studies like this to understand students and the issues that they face. Then the university could prioritise the needs and form groups of students based on these needs. In his perspective, the role of the university would be limited to a facilitator. Based on appropriate research studies the university would provide a place and time and notify potential participants about the existence of the learning community. Throughout the learning community, the students would be the ones who decide on the direction they want to take based on their reflections on their learning.

A confession

At the beginning of the sixth session, before other participants joined, Ahmad asked to share his shifting thoughts with me and the facilitators. He said:

I have got a confession I don't want to make it in front of everyone, but I'm going to make it now. I'm serious about this because when I first joined this learning community, it was me doing Mir a favour actually and I came to his learning community so there would be people there. This was actually my intention when I first came here and I thought that my language is okay so I might not need to learn a lot from this learning community, but I want to say today and after attending some sessions, every day I leave here with something in hand, something tangible I would say, something that I learn about academic writing. This is what I wanted to say.

4d. Farzaneh's Story

Introducing Farzaneh

Farzaneh is an Iranian PhD student at the University of Canterbury studying French and at the time the group came together she was about to present her work for her confirmation at the end of her first year. Her work uses Queer Theory to analyse a French film.

As an Iranian student, Farzaneh cares about her community and wants to help students out. From knowing her through the community, I know that whenever someone in the community needs help she is there. Being a minority in a country makes compatriots look out for each other when in need, a quality that she really has. Initially, Farzaneh joined to help to help me out in my study. She acknowledged:

The initial reason was that you asked me and I knew you and I just wanted to help.

However, it was evident from the beginning that she did not know exactly what the learning community was about but was excited about it. She said at the first meeting:

I'm not really sure what's happening here so I would love to know what exactly is going to happen.

After the first session and learning about the topic of the study, Farzaneh found she was interested in the study and continued to attend. The idea of working on academic writing was something that she acknowledged she needed. Like many of the other participants, she found the PhD journey lonely and expressed appreciation for group learning. In her final interview she said:

The idea - it was great. I had never done such a thing. In your thesis, in your journey, especially here it is all research based, you are on your own. So it helped me remember that it is good to learn together with a group of people rather than do it on your own.

By profession, Farzaneh is a teacher and a translator who speaks English very fluently. Having a helpful attitude, she wanted to help others in the learning community with her knowledge if she could. During the study, she did not attend some of the sessions due to preparing for and undergoing her confirmation. However, for her, the feeling of comfort and the gain from the learning community drew her back:

From the very start I really liked the people who were attending, the topic, everything sounded helpful and fascinated me so I liked it and found it helpful.

Although she was absent for some sessions, there was a consistent flow in her attendance and, more importantly, active participation.

Development of academic writing skills

Farzaneh explained that she was a teacher and a fluent speaker of English. She explained she did not expect to learn much but mostly hoped to give, as she considered that she did not have problems with grammar or vocabulary. However, as the learning community progressed she began to acknowledge problems. When Diba brought up her difficulty with verb tenses, Farzaneh also shared that she had difficulty with tenses in her writing. I noted in my reflective journal:

Farzaneh mentioned that in her proposal she used *will* when she should have used *have*.

During the first session, the main difficulty that Farzaneh raised was her struggle to start work:

For me the problem I had first was procrastinating.

As a consequence, she lost confidence in what she wrote and threw most of it away:

The starting was a major thing for me to put pen on paper. For me, specifically my case, when I started writing, a lot of the things that I wrote ended up in the rubbish bin because I thought that it was not good enough.

There were two reasons that Farzaneh brought up for this:

I had excuses such as having family, children and such things like that.

As well as being occupied with family issues, Farzaneh mentioned she had been away from academia for fifteen years. This made her feel unfamiliar with the process of writing and lacking in confidence about what she wrote.

Participating in the learning community helped Farzaneh in other ways too. She recounted:

I found out that I was not the only one suffering thinking that I would never be able to write a paragraph. Then I became more confident hearing about other people's experiences, other people's issues around writing.

In her final interview, Farzaneh acknowledged that before participating in the learning community, she had felt that her writing was hopeless and did not feel confident about it.

However, seeing other people also struggling with their writing made her feel that she was not alone. She reflected:

I was hopeless at writing, but then reading other people's, listening and seeing what other people had shared, it helped me a little bit. I was okay. I was a bit as bad as I thought but of course there is always so much room for improvement but it did honestly helped me realise that I was not as bad as I thought I was.

Not meeting the standards of academic writing

One of the difficulties Farzaneh had with her writing was brought to her attention by her supervisors, who told her that her writing was too simple. She said:

Even my supervisors, they say that it is good, it conveys the meaning, but they still keep telling me that I need to work more on academic writing... I am sure one thing is academy vocabulary because they both mentioned it.

Farzaneh, however, initially asserted that it was a good thing that her writing was simple. She explained in an early session:

I think that what I write, people can understand it, I can understand it, it makes sense, but it looks too simple to be considered as an academic writing. Maybe it is my choice of words, although the structure and everything is good, my supervisor says so, and anyone who reads it says so. To me it is okay, but apparently, it does not measure up to the standards of academic writing, that's what my problem has been. Most of it has been my choice of words.

Farzaneh explained that she considered herself a perfectionist and, because of that, she was very sensitive about what she wrote and therefore tended to have a lot of repetition through making sure she explained herself. She suggested her professional background was a contributing factor:

Maybe because of being a teacher most of my life, I always tried to use the language that all the people can understand. I always try to make things digestible for everyone.

She explained that whereas she had got used to simplifying her language for students to understand and she used the same approach in her academic writing, her supervisors did not approve:

I've got two supervisors, I asked them to mark my writing out of 10, and they both gave me around 6. But we all agreed that I had no grammar mistakes, the only thing was that my main supervisor said: you write as if you are writing to the general public.

Initially members of the group voiced opinions affirming that writing simply was a good thing. The facilitators agreed, but wondered if the supervisors had been suggesting that the simplicity meant important scholarly details had been left out. Farzaneh said she had not thought about it like that.

Farzaneh then shared her supervisors had given her advice in regards to modelling her writing on articles she read:

We are reading a lot of articles while we are doing our research. It was his suggestion to read one article a week and then try to write your own version of it but paying attention to the style. I wasn't able to do that.

As she started to notice differences between her writing and what she read in articles, she began to make some changes:

So the register of my writing was different than that and I started to make more conscious choices of sentences and words. That was one thing that I tried and it worked.

However, Farzaneh said, implementing this strategy seemed hard as the amount of reading and writing was extensive, and so members of the group suggested she could perhaps narrow down her reading to paragraphs or chapters and write similarly in smaller pieces. She could focus particularly on the conclusion or introduction, because, as one group member suggested, those are really important structural and stylistic sections. Farzaneh acknowledged that reading the articles helped her address one of her writing issues, that of using informal phrases. As examples Farzaneh reported that she realised that she frequently used *a lot of* and that could be replaced by *so much* or *so many*.

One thing that I learned, I wasn't able to find this combination of words at all, in none of those articles. So that was one thing that I learned but maybe it was a bit less formal so that was why they had not used it.

Sharing her writing

When she felt she understood the purpose of the group, Farzaneh sent in a piece of her writing for discussion and feedback. She explained that she felt comfortable sharing:

I had only shared my writing with my own supervisors and I did not have any intention of showing it to anyone else, giving it to anyone else to read. But in that learning community when it came up I thought it was good for me to have some opinions of other people apart from my own supervisors. So yeah I don't think I would share my writing with anyone if I hadn't been in that learning community.

This was significant as sharing her writing was not something that she would normally do, even during her Masters, and this was a new experience for her. The learning community gave her the chance to experience sharing her writing and to get feedback from people other than her supervisors and she found this a useful experience, as she noted:

I'm sure I would have done the same thing [not sharing] with my PhD thesis as well, but it was good, it was really really good that I got this chance and I did it.

She added that she was surprised that it was useful to share her writing with students from different fields of study, commenting:

I never thought it would help to share your writing with people from Engineering, Education, other departments, and that was something that I think it was good.

She argued that being able to share writing with peers and give feedback to each other is a good way of improving writing:

I think that one of the ways is to just change writing with your peers. It is not going to be perfect because nobody is perfect but I think at least you will get some feedback on a daily basis.

Discussion of Farzaneh's writing

The first issue that was brought up in the group after Farzaneh shared her writing was that she did not write numbers and years in chronological order, which made it hard to read and comprehend her text. In a later session, Farzaneh reported how she used that feedback:

There were too many numbers, dates, on my writing and I did change it and I think it made things look nicer. So I started them moving around. They were all at the start so

what I did was that I got rid of the unnecessary ones and I moved more detailed information down further in what I say.

One of the facilitators pointed that her sentences were overlong which made understanding difficult. Another member of the group identified that in the middle of her paragraph, she mentioned important points that should have been put at the beginning of a paragraph.

Farzaneh reflected:

I myself had not noticed it, my supervisors never told me anything but then that feedback that I got from the learning community made me aware that it's important to make a new paragraph for each important idea.

Farzaneh reported that right after she got feedback she made changes in her writing and thought that the introduction started looking neater. From there on, she said, she became more mindful of the amount of material she put in each section of her writing.

Continuation in participation and struggles

During one of the later sessions, Farzaneh reflected on her shift in attitude about participating in the group:

There is also something in it for us as well. Of course at the start I came here because I knew Mir. However, I was in the process of writing my own proposal so I just thought it might help me with my own proposal.

The people and then Jess and Kate I really liked them. Both of them were such lovely and knowledgeable people. From the first session, I could tell that I would get something out of this because of the topics and everything.

For me it was good enough to be encouraged to come back.

Farzaneh highlighted that she valued the discussion with the facilitators and their feedback, finding it. Although participating was not easy for her and she was absent for a number of sessions, she returned regularly and willingly to the group. She stated:

Yes, I do enjoy them, I wouldn't be here if I hadn't been enjoying.

Overall feeling about the learning community

Although Farzaneh's initial reason for participation was to help out a compatriot in his study, as her participation continued she became genuinely engaged. She talked about what she liked about participating in the learning community. Firstly, she said she found it useful because writing is a major part of postgraduate studies.

She also said she liked that the advice given was not at all like being told what to do in a class:

The relationship is not like a teacher student one, but the advice and the tips and the information we get from this learning community is expert opinions in really friendly learning community.

For Farzaneh it was significant that the advice she was receiving in the learning community was moderated by the facilitators whom she saw as experts in the field and that she also had a chance to get opinions from people other than her supervisors. Further, being physically present in the learning community was important for her:

It's more concrete and tangible because you see the person sitting in front of you and then the writing of that person. I can learn more from such a thing than if I just have a sample and look at it and try to see what's good about it or what's wrong. Actually listening to us talk about a real person's writing has helped a lot.

Hearing other students' difficulties and receiving feedback on her writing made Farzaneh more conscious of the issues that she had. Further, seeing the people who were experiencing these difficulties and hearing different opinions deepened her understanding, made her mindful, and helped her develop different perspectives of looking at writing.

To emphasise the benefits she received in the learning community, Farzaneh compared it with the university's academic skill centre. She reflected:

There are some support sessions but something like this is interactive but those sessions they just come and talk and explain and it's not as useful as this.

In the academic skill centre, Farzaneh stated that she would not get a chance to interact with other students as it is between her and an advisor, whereas the learning community provided her with the chance to see other students and learn from their experience. She reflected:

We just heard: okay these are the ideas, this is how your thesis should be, how the structure of your thesis should be. We hear a lot but we don't get to actually talk about it between each other. It's not concrete, just some ideas and some abstract things.

The learning community provided her with the chance to hear a wide range of concrete experiences through interaction with other students, she said, and that made learning more tangible and concrete:

Now I know how important it is to have groups of PhD students because it is really terrible if there is just you, your supervisors and that is it.

As I reflect on Farzaneh's comments I agree that a PhD as is often a lonely journey, in which discussion is often only between students and their supervisors and students do not get a chance to get into groups and interact.

Farzaneh reported that she found reassurance in the group discussions:

I found out that I was not the only one suffering from thinking that I would never be able to write a paragraph.

The learning community helped her realise that she was not only alone in facing writing difficulties, and hearing about seeing other students' uncertainties and problem helped her with her confidence. She reported that while she identified some problems she still had to resolve in her writing, she felt reassured that her use of English was not a problem:

I found out that the things that I was struggling with were different things, but at least I was not struggling with some structural grammar.

Farzaneh also highlighted her appreciation of being allowed flexibility. She stated:

I personally didn't need too much structure. So for me the flexibility was good.

She further explained she liked the flexibility in being able to choose when to attend and the way the content of the sessions was shaped by the participants. In reflecting on her comment I note the differences in the ways individuals prefer to learn. While some other participants in the group would have preferred more predetermined structure to the sessions, Farzaneh seemed to want to take charge of her learning and enjoyed being able to make choices about what was important to her. I wonder how much the difference is due to previous experience. Farzaneh is an older student and a teacher and so has had time to explore different ways of learning,

whereas some of the other participants were recent graduates of programmes that had been predominantly teacher led.

Thoughts about facilitators and culture

Farzaneh acknowledged that while she did not initially want to share her writing, she had felt the need for feedback.

I needed some reassurance, I needed to have the approval from some other people and I got that.

The learning community gave her the chance to get the feedback she desired which she took it seriously enough to implement in her writing. She reported:

So my introduction started looking neater and with fewer numbers and dates which was nice. So that was one thing that directly affected my confirmation proposal.

She reflected that although she did learn from participants' comments on their own writing on that of other people and on hers, she mostly learnt from the facilitators:

I picked up a little bit about the different stuff that was discussed there. Maybe more from the facilitators. The good thing was that the feedback and the ideas and the information that I got was way more sophisticated I can say than what I might have got from just a group of PhD students.

Farzaneh noted that the facilitators did, however, listen to and work with advice that came from the student participants in the group:

I noticed that the ideas of the participants were really interesting to them.

Her reflection highlights that the discussions in the group were a two-way exchange: The facilitators did not see it as their role to just give advice; they listened with interest and appreciation to other participants' suggestions.

Farzaneh noted that the role of the facilitators was different from what she had come to expect from supervisors. She acknowledged the facilitators were also supervisors but they were not her supervisors, and that somehow made her freer to talk with them. She reflected on the difference in one of the sessions:

For some reason, I feel more comfortable talking about my issues around writing with you rather than with my own supervisors.

The greater ease she felt with the facilitators may have been due to the formality one may feel with their supervisors or the fear of losing face. In the learning community expressing her difficulties did not threaten her face and no judgment was made that could influence her work in any way. She reflected:

The advice and the tips and the information we get from this learning community is expert opinions in really friendly learning community.

It is hard in my culture for you to say: I don't know. It may be harder in some cultures that they don't know and they want help. There are more expectations.

As a compatriot, I know the amount of respect an Iranian has towards his or her superiors. This respect is even much higher in the previous generation in comparison to my generation. Farzaneh is from the previous generation and by getting to know her through the study, I learned she is a respectful woman. So getting over those respectful manners and getting herself comfortable enough to share experiences with others, especially with the facilitators, brought a sense of ease. As I think about her comments, I reflect about the power relationship between supervisor and student. Even when a supervisor is open, friendly and encouraging of student ideas, we know, as students, that they are in charge of our study. It is hard sometimes in a one-on-one meeting to question them or to say we do not understand what they are saying. In the learning community the facilitators may, as Farzaneh acknowledged, have expertise but they are just some of the voices in the discussion and each participant is also just another voice so there is less fear of shame in admitting a problem and less fear of being wrong in voicing an opinion.

Keeping the learning community

Farzaneh not only showed interest in participating in the learning community during the study, but she was also interested in its future to the extent that she was willing to continue what was already established. She said:

If others are still keen I would love to because I think we discuss things, we share our writing issues with each other, so I am keen.

She stated that if others were interested she would like to continue to share her writing and difficulties and get feedback from others. She added that she wanted real meetings rather than continuing the learning community online, because for her seeing people was significant as it pushed her to read others' work and share writing with them.

She gave several reasons why she was interested in keeping the already established learning community. One was her current stage of study:

So I am literally starting to write my chapters, so at this stage learning communities can be very useful.

In addition, she saw it as an advantage that there was no need to initiate a support group and develop it as the learning community had already been developed:

Now that we have found some shared interests, it would be a good idea if we can share our writings with each other.

Farzaneh said she believed that participants had got to know each other, felt comfortable, trusted each other, and found shared interest with one another.

Seeing Farzaneh's interest, Kate suggested that Farzaneh could take the role of the convener and make further arrangements. Farzaneh was enthusiastic:

I would love to be the convener or the coordinator and we will sure need your opinions. It might not be as regular as this one, I would do definitely.

When she considered using the idea of a learning community in her own life, Farzaneh reflected that she would use it in parts of her career in the future, perhaps simply as meetings:

The fact that we [teachers] have monthly meetings, that's what we do, we just share our problems, share our ideas and then give feedback to each other. We need to think about how we can create it and how we can just keep going.

Farzaneh's suggestion was that the currently monthly meetings with her colleagues at work could be further developed to become an active learning community where they could share their ideas and give feedback to each other. Her suggestion made me reflect that learning communities could operate in many different fields, not just with students.

Concerns and suggestions

Although Farzaneh wanted to keep the learning community going, she also wanted to examine suggestions that could make it more useful. She reflected that her own learning had been enhanced by meeting with those she considered ahead of her in doctoral progress:

For me, before confirmation stage, I learned a lot because there were people either at my stage or further ahead.

Farzaneh suggested that the particular stage of writing is important in terms of students' readiness to know what to look for, acknowledge problems, and get feedback. In her view, the best time in students' study to attend a learning community would be in its early stages. She further added:

But it won't benefit unless they are under pressure and they know how precious some comments are. The closer you get to some milestones you know the value of some comments. When you have made your mistakes and you've got some feedback, these can be helpful.

Farzaneh's comments prompt me to reflect about learning. Do we only learn from those who seem to be ahead of us? Is pressure always necessary for learning? I am still exploring the answers but I do note that the various participants in this group seemed to show different ways of learning. One of the potential values of a learning community, I think, is that it can accommodate a range of learning habits and preferences.

Farzaneh showed concern about the students who dropped out. She said:

I just wonder what should we do really because to me everything was positive, but something must have not gone right for the ones that didn't come back. I think it's a good idea if we could discuss it.

She suggested two reasons that seemed likely to her. The first was that individuals may have had more pressing personal concerns or just been too busy:

It might have been just something personal.

The other was that the participants might not have had the chance to talk and therefore address their own difficulties. She reflected:

Maybe sometimes, I think sometimes people didn't get a chance to say much.

In her view, the online format of the sessions was such that did not allow everyone to express their issues and, as a result, their writing difficulties were not addressed. She reflected:

The first session we talked about it and discussed it but I'm not sure if we did the same thing for the ones who joined us after the start.

Farzaneh also suggested that in order to attract more participants and engage them in the study, there needed be more structure. This structure would enable participants to be mindful of the

goals, both for themselves and for the study, and so allow them to understand the learning community's path. I note that elsewhere Farzaneh had applauded the flexibility of the group, explaining she did not need to be given structure. I reflect her ambivalence towards structure reinforces what might be a predictable, and perhaps useful, tension between structure and flexibility within a group that learns collaboratively. I discuss this further in Chapter Five.

In implementing learning communities that might come as a result of this study, like Ahmed, Farzaneh believed the university should be the initiator. She suggested:

That would be great if they could just provide those means and facilities and then leave it all.

Accordingly, the university should not interfere with or have control over the direction of the learning community. What Farzaneh suggested was that a structure was needed to establish a foundation for the learning community by the university, but there should be student guided flexibility in its practice. In her view, the university should play a key role in setting up and enabling learning communities. She argued:

Because if these learning communities are not initiated and organised by institutions then what can we do to make sure that there will be continuance?

What was most valuable to Farzaneh

The issues Farzaneh was most interested in exploring were ones of style, analysis, critical thinking, and ideas. She reflected:

The first time I heard people talking about some grammatical problems, I thought the people who were doing this [doctoral study] did not have problems at that level.

I was expecting to hear more about critical thinking and analysis of other people's ideas than just bare basics. It was more about the style, or the analysis that I would use the critical thinking.

Throughout the sessions, Farzaneh repeatedly acknowledged that she really valued being able to talk about what she wanted to achieve in her work with others and particularly appreciated being able to talk about academic ideas with senior academics, professors, who were not her supervisors and so exercised no power yet showed interest.

As I think about what Farzaneh said about her interests I remember that I had originally planned that the learning community would be a place where students could identify and discuss their

writing difficulties and had anticipated that these would predominantly consist of problems with grammar, vocabulary and paragraphing structure. I reflect that Farzaneh saw improvement in academic writing through quite a different lens. She saw herself as someone with interesting academic ideas and she was looking for opportunity to talk with academic peers and mentors about better ways to express those ideas. Her lens made me realise that the elimination of surface errors was not necessarily the most important element in improving academic writing.

A postscript

After my project, finished Farzaneh did take an initiative to establish a learning community for Iranian PhD students to improve their English speaking and knowledge. She has created a group on the application Telegram that include all PhD Iranian students and suggested that they could gather on weekly bases, with one person each session presenting their material and getting feedback from others. There would also be someone, she suggested, more proficient in English acting as the facilitator.

4e. Mona's Story

Introducing Mona

Mona is a PhD candidate at the University of Canterbury studying Human Development, nearing the end of her first year of study, and on the verge of seeking her confirmation. Her doctoral study is a qualitative one about immigrant students in high school who want to leave school, not continue tertiary education and go straight to the labour market. She is a homemaker and mother of two young boys.

I have known Mona during my study and have known her family too. She and her husband always look out for people they know, caring about them and trying to help them in any ways possible. Knowing therefore that I was in need of participants, she decided to join the learning community. In addition, Mona is a person who takes commitments seriously, so that when she went on a holiday to Iran in the middle of the study, she still tried to connect through zoom although that was not successful. She reported:

I tried so much and I couldn't connect to you.

Another reason Mona decided to join the learning community was interest and curiosity about other people's research:

I'm also doing my PhD here, qualitative research. First of all, I wanted to know how people conduct focus group studies so it was my curiosity.

In addition, Mona's previous studies had been in her mother tongue, Farsi. She explained:

I did my Masters in Farsi. It's supposed to be academic. They accepted my thesis. But for English, it is really vague for me.

Mona's words (*supposed to be academic. They accepted my thesis*) seem to reflect her uncertainty about what is expected of her in her current study and about how well her previous experience has prepared her. She wonders if her former work was academic enough, and notes that working in English presents further challenges. She added:

Now I can understand my writing was terrible; even in Farsi it was terrible.

Mona reported that she came from an Engineering background to do her PhD in Humanities. In making the shift, she encountered new expectations about academic writing which she found difficult. She talks more about the challenges later in this account.

Development of academic writing skills in Humanities

While Mona joined the learning community out of curiosity, at the same time, she knew that she was struggling with academic writing and intended to improve. Unlike others, she did not talk about being alone on her journey; rather she talked about the difficulties she was facing. She acknowledged her struggles with writing during her IELTS test in which she got a low score. A difficulty that Mona faced was her confusion about what was expected within academic writing:

One of the problem for me is that I still do not know what academic writing is.

I reflect that Mona was talking about more than a definition of academic writing: she was acknowledging she had no scaffolding or background to follow. Moreover, she was also confused and unclear about the kind of language she should be using. She followed up by saying that while her supervisor makes questioning comments on her work, she does not have a clear idea of what her supervisor's expectations are in her academic writing:

What is the supervisor's expectation from us? It's not clear for me.

There are many *what does that mean?* sentences written on this proposal. Especially in the literature review section. I found that when I want to paraphrase, I get confused and make a mess; I mean my sentences are not clear.

She reported that they also made comments about the sequential order of what she wrote:

But other comments were about *this paragraph shouldn't be here, this sentence shouldn't be here* or *you should delete this sentence* because it's not meaningful or unclear.

From her supervisors' feedback on her proposal, Mona understood that her writing was considered unclear and vague and that there were problems with cohesion and order of sentences and paragraphs. She acknowledged the challenges as overwhelming and she was confused:

I am always thinking I need to change so much and sometimes I think instead of that word I will use that word and then I think is it a good word? Is it a proper word for this paragraph? It is ambiguous for me, it is not clear for me to use other words or other phrases.

Mona also mentioned that SOAR (Situation, Obstacles, Action and Result) advisors had notified her that she did not provide evidence for her claims. SOAR advisors at the university are qualified postgraduate students who give advice and assistance in their areas of expertise. Their comments seemed to be in line with what her supervisors told her: that she talked about subjects without giving background information, and therefore she had to read more before writing. She explored these critiques further when she shared her writing.

Sharing her writing and getting feedback

Mona reported that she was a person who would seek feedback from others when needed. The people Mona first shared her writing with were her supervisors. She reported confusion:

When she asked me *what you mean by that?* I had to explain, this is one of my problems here.

She found her supervisors' feedback unclear and very general, so she struggled to find the root of her problem. Therefore, she approached two of her friends, commenting on the role her friends played in helping her:

For one of them English is not his first language but his English is good and he helps me to reword my writing if needed and the other is a native speaker that sometimes helps me to see if everything is clear and nice.

Before submitting her proposal, her friends gave her feedback on her writing to address her issues. She reported that one told her that the main problem was lack of simplicity:

She told me *why do you make everything so sophisticated and why didn't you use simple words?*

Through their feedback, she came to realise that she had been using complicated language and words in her writing. She reflected:

It's okay if you use simple sentences and no one expects you to use so many hard and uncommon words. That was one of the mistakes I did in writing my English materials.

She added:

Also, I have some problem with punctuation but my main problem is making everything clear.

Mona brought in a piece of her writing to get feedback from the learning community. She showed that she was not just open to getting feedback, but she also implemented key aspects of the feedback and came back to share the results.

From the beginning she acknowledged that her main concerns in writing are clarity and punctuation. She also reported that she finds it hard to know how to start a new paragraph.

She noted that she has problems in her current literature review with knowing how to deal with the Māori words and phrases she meets in New Zealand articles:

In their documents they use *Aotearoa*, and also other Māori words like for family they use *whanau*.

A member of the group suggested that phrases and names that are specific to a culture or language should be explained for the wider audience. She explained that she has problems paraphrasing some of those words and also in paraphrasing what she reads generally. After he read the writing Mona shared, Ahmad suggested that the words she had used in her writing did not seem appropriate for the content. She acknowledged:

I'm searching for a word. I read, for example, a paragraph and I want to replace some words when I want to paraphrase. And it happens a lot for me that I use some words that doesn't fit.

Mona saw the problem as a result of not considering clarity or connotation. Ahmad followed up, suggesting she could use a collocation dictionary while writing. Further, he suggested she was making assumptions about the reader's background knowledge and advised her to read other articles, examining their structure so that she might replicate it. Later he suggested a more general four-step process:

You put your idea and then you support it with something from literature and then you give an example from real life in relation to this thing and then you evaluate it from your own perspective.

In her reflection on the community after the last session, Mona acknowledged that she knew about this kind of four-step strategy, but had not used it in her actual writing. She said that, having been reminded of it, she started using the strategy. She recalled:

I started to organise my mind and when I was revising my proposal I tried to follow a line of argument that I made by myself.

Within the project, after bringing back a new sample to the group, Mona reported she was finding the strategy useful, and she decided to implement it throughout all her writing. She also acknowledged she had to do more reading, feeling more confident to revise the literature review in her proposal after sharing her writing with the group, after members had pointed out specific problems that helped her understand her supervisor's critique that her writing was not clear. She said:

I think I need to refine the literature review and also I need to study more about some topics.

Mona reported that as she started to apply the advice she received about paraphrasing and planning, she came to realise her difficulty in writing was also in organising her thoughts in a logical order. Referring to Ahmad's advice, she said:

I knew that but I forget that and then when he said that I was like *oh yes I have to stick to that*.

Over subsequent sessions, Mona worked hard to apply the advice she got from the learning community to different aspects of her writing.

Paraphrasing

Mona reported that when paraphrasing she would get confused and not use appropriate words:

I'm always stressful and I am always anxious about copying some words, because one of the problems in my writing is paraphrasing.

She admitted a lack of knowledge in knowing the exact meaning of words:

It is ambiguous for me, it is not clear for me [how] to use other words or other phrases.

In paraphrasing she explained how she would habitually juggle things, changing the order of words and using synonyms. As a result, sometimes the meaning of the sentence would change or the whole sentence would become vague and unclear. While revising her proposal, Mona spotted other difficulties. She reported:

My problem is that I do not know how to put these materials. I know this paper is relevant, this sentence, this paragraph is relevant to my research or it is in contrast to my argument but I don't know how to use this and that and merge them and make a meaningful paragraph, a meaningful thing.

She acknowledged that after reading and finding relevant ideas, she struggled to merge and put ideas together in an organised and meaningfully coherent. She explained:

I couldn't concentrate on one topic. I go to other topics under a title which was not very relevant to that title and that makes lots of problems in my proposal.

She admitted that during writing, as she jumped from one idea to another, she would lose her concentration, as she jumped from one idea to another. Therefore, she sought feedback from different sources for paraphrasing. She reported that she shared her writing with friends who she saw as competent and took their advice. She also used university student support facilities. One was the SOAR advisors team. She explained that the advisor would give advice on small segments of her writing, approving it or asking further questions:

He reads the paragraph and says okay, it is clear or you need help to fix that.

She reported that the advisors suggested a two-step method in paraphrasing, which was to first change the order of sentences, and then change the words, nouns and verbs. She reported that trying to follow this advice had created new problems:

When I paraphrase, I do these two steps at the same time and sometimes I get confused and sometimes I miss some information or change the meaning.

It was suggested in the group that taking these two steps separately would make paraphrasing easier for her and she would be able to maintain the meaning of the sentence.

Mona reported that she also participated in helpful courses on paraphrasing provided by the university's academic skills centre that she found helpful:

I also participated in a course in our skill centre but it was about paraphrasing and it was so good for me and I encourage everyone to participate.

Within the learning community, Farzaneh had suggested that Mona could read articles each week and write a summary from her own understanding. However, Mona reported that she did not always find the strategy useful for her as she tended to get stressed about copying exact words.

About Farzaneh's strategy, I tried that strategy and it almost works for me. But the problem with that strategy, and even referring to some articles in my proposal, was that I'm always stressful and I am always anxious about copying some words.

Mona also sought help from the groups' facilitators in regards to paraphrasing. She received two suggestions. One was to use direct quotes followed by comment. The other was to read the text, walk away, and think of what she has understood from it.

Developing a habit of daily writing

Mona constantly presented herself as an active student who pursues change and improvement in her writing. Therefore, she made demands on the learning community. This was particularly high as she was nearing her confirmation.

She affirmed her goal:

I think I want to improve all of the aspects, grammar, and clear meaning.

She would ask:

How I can practice every day? How can I improve my writing by practicing?

She stated that she had been writing on a daily basis but the problem was that there was no one who would give her feedback on her writing. She recounted she had tried some strategies on her own:

Another way to practice is to listen and write, to listen to TED talks, like some academic talks and write it down so you will improve gradually but I think I will do that but I still need a reference, something to show me weak points.

The group facilitators suggested she develop a process of keeping a daily journal or diary that would allow her to write short daily reflective pieces and bring some back to show the group:

She agreed:

I am going to plan for that and I will show you that journal next session.

Despite an initial discomfort, she persisted with writing a journal:

I decided to write a paragraph every day about what happens during the day. I felt silly because I used very simple sentences and I didn't feel good about that. Anyway, I kept writing and tried to correct myself by looking at Google.

In giving her feedback on the samples she brought to the group, one of the facilitators suggested she could concentrate on thinking about one aspect at a time. Mona reported on applying this advice:

I focused, for example, on past tense and present tense and also some days I focused on singular and plural forms of the nouns and verbs.

After sharing a journal entry where she had held this focus, the facilitator told her she had eliminated earlier mistakes with verbs, and commended her success with the comment:

They are not there at all. You've got them. They are good, they are really good.

In the end final interview, Mona acknowledged the importance of focusing on one aspect at a time:

I felt so good about that. Yes, it works for me a lot.

She added:

When you start writing and you start to learn about your writing, how to improve it, you will not usually separate these areas so it was very useful comments.

It was significant that Mona took feedback and turned it into action. She did not limit herself to getting advice from the learning community but she kept on sending in her writing to elicit further feedback. She reported:

Step by step I tried different strategies and at the moment I roughly know what I should do to write a piece of academic writing but it didn't happen all at once.

She reflected that she became confident her writing was improving:

Kate told me that you really stepped up your writing. And as I told you that I usually give my writings to the student advisor to read and he also said that your writing is much better.

She acknowledged the value of getting detailed feedback on her work:

Especially the comments that Kate gave me for the last writing. It was very valuable and it real helped me and when I changed it again and sent it to her she told me that you really improved your writing and I felt so good about that.

Different field of study

Mona did not come from a Humanities background; rather she had a science background. She reported:

Actually, my background is engineering, and I started my Ph.D. in Education and it was so challenging.

Coming from a science background for Mona meant that she lacked experience in writing for the humanities, her new field of study. In the past, she had published English articles in sciences, but due to the lower expectancy of academic writing, she had never been challenged about it. When she started her Ph.D., she noticed the new writing requirements of Humanities. Mona said:

Another problem is that in Singapore when I was working, they did not expect from Engineering students very good English but here I'm not an Engineering student.

All her studies in sciences were quantitative, and Mona had not become familiar with qualitative methods of writing. Reflecting on the challenges she faced, she added:

My main problem is that I cannot talk with trends and tables anymore and I need to talk with words and I have put everything in clear sentences.

In the sciences, where the main focus was on the content, she was not expected to provide quality academic writing. However, Mona noticed that attention to detail was of high concern in the humanities. She explained:

You have to express your ideas and express anything clearly and in the way that you really want to, choosing the word correctly, to say what you really want to say.

Mona reflected on the fact that participants in the learning community came from different fields and had different approaches to academic writing, something she was able to notice the difference because of her experience in sciences, adding:

I found out that most of the people who are consistent in this learning community were the people who were not in the field of any Engineering Sciences.

Listening to the other participants, Mona was able to observe the differences between participants' views in relation to academic writing. She reflected:

Maybe they found that it is not that important or maybe talking about academic writing is not of their needs.

She added:

Based on my experience because my Masters and my Bachelor were in another field and now I can see in Engineering students they don't really care about their writings.

Now I can see the difference that the people who study in arts and these areas their writings and their needs are totally different from Engineering background.

Overall feeling about the learning community and sharing

Initially, as was previously noted, Mona joined the learning community out of curiosity and to help a compatriot. However, she acknowledged she stayed because she sought to improve her writing and was already actively looking for ways of getting help. She admitted:

I felt that if someone is listening to me and later you and the facilitators explained about what we are going to do in these sessions. I find it useful for myself because before that I had a plan to really do something for my writing.

She had no clear idea about the intentions of the learning community and it took her a few sessions to start grasping the goals for the study. She acknowledged:

After three sessions passed, I was like *ok this is learning community, we have to share, we have to get feedback from other people and we learn together* and when I get the concept I felt more comfortable.

It seems that, despite the information sheet, she had expected some sort of tutorial format. I wondered if she had ever previously been in a situation where students were expected to share ideas with each other rather than listen to a lecturer. My own undergraduate experience suggested that students in countries like Iran expect direct guidance from their teachers.

An expressive person, sharing is part of Mona's personality. She acknowledged:

I like to express my opinions because I feel a relief, because I feel that some other people are listening to me and I also like to see that my opinion resonates with other opinions.

However sharing her writing was still a challenge for her, as she feared judgement, threatening her face:

My opinions I do not feel bad I really feel good but not about sharing my writings.

Having fears, she recalled:

I felt that maybe my writing is not very good and all of these people are seniors. I mean two university professors and most of the participants were my friends and I felt, what would they think about me when they read my writing?

However, she overcame the conflict between getting help and her fear of losing face, and decided to share her writing. She explained:

I felt that okay at least I can improve myself and I really like to get feedback from people because I think other people's comments will really help me to improve my work and I

After, when I got the feedbacks, I felt better.

The positive feedback assured her of the purpose of the learning community and provoked her to continue sharing. She reflected:

I continued sharing my daily writing and I gave you part of my literature review. So that's why I continued sharing - because I felt good.

She reported that enjoyment of the group process and appreciation of different points of view were factors in helping her understanding:

I really enjoy using other people's experience and point of view- how they look at things from different aspects.

Reflecting on the feedback made her make changes to her writing. She reported:

After our last session, I started to organise my mind and when I was revising my proposal, I tried to follow something that I made by myself.

Later, Mona affirmed that she supervisor commented positively on how she had improved her writing. She stated:

It was very valuable and it really helped me. And when I changed it again and sent it to her, she told me that you really improved your writing, and I felt so good about that.

Mona's view towards sharing changed to the extent that she admitted:

I think sharing the writing was the best part.

She expressed appreciation saying:

I would like to thank Jess and Kate and Mir for providing such a great opportunity and for supporting us, especially me because I've sent many things to you to check.

Apart from learning the positive aspects of sharing, Mona learned about the concept of a learning community. She explained:

Actually, the concept was very interesting for me I didn't know about that learning community and I think it's a very useful way of learning for anything, not just for learning English and yeah I find it quite interesting.

The learning community provided her a space where she could systematically process her writing problems. She reflected:

You know for me this learning community was like, step by step I tried different strategies and at the moment I roughly know what I should do to write a piece of academic writing.

There were aspects of the learning community that she particularly appreciated. She recounted:

I liked the flexibility because it should be based on the people's needs, it shouldn't be dictated from outside.

I think if it was not flexible, it was not a learning community from my point of view.

When I asked her, after the project finished, whether she found feedback she got from the student participants or the facilitators more useful, Mona replied:

Definitely [the] facilitators. Professor Kate and Professor Jess both were [of] great help.

She also acknowledged the important role of the participants, being second language speakers facing similar problems and being able to see aspects the facilitators could not see, Nevertheless, the facilitators' role in commenting on her study was much more significant for her. She continued by reaffirming that she had found it worthwhile to overcome her nervousness about getting feedback:

Although it was a bit hard for me to get feedbacks from other people, but it was very useful for me because when we discuss about that it becomes clearer and I can see many things.

Reflecting on her initial frustration in joining the learning community Mona identified only one main issue:

When I was in Iran I texted Diba, we talked about something and then she told me to try to participate in that session of the learning community it is very valuable and I tried so much and I couldn't connect to you and I think this is the only negative thing.

The trouble of internet connection was one that anyone in Iran who tried to join would have faced as the Zoom platform is filtered in Iran. The problem with connection makes me realise that the concept of a global online community is more restricted than it sounds, as not only are various platforms blocked in some countries but many rural populations in developing countries have little or no access to the internet.

Concern about dropout of participants

Mona expressed concern about other participants dropping out:

It was some awkward moments in that session but when the number of participants dropped, I felt not very comfortable. I felt some more participants were needed.

Participants were the core of the learning community according to Mona. When the number went down, the liveliness, amount of discussion, and sharing reduced. She added that she felt obliged to be active, share, and participate so that the community would be active. She recalled:

I think what happens if no one wants to share their experience. You know for some sessions I was not ready and I don't know what to say and I got stressed.

Mona shared her thoughts about why participants dropped out. She stated that one of the problems started before the learning community began.

The way you advertise needed to be improved because I really want people to come.

She considered that participants had not fully understood the goals learning community and that further problems arose in the first session. She recalled:

I felt all of the participants were excited to share their experiences but they did not have enough time and it took long.

She added:

You don't have a clear structure and plan about each session and some people do not like that.

I think one of the reasons that people didn't come back to the community is that some people come to these meetings, not from the beginning, they start from the second session or the third session, and it was not clear what was the goal of this learning community.

Mona further reflected:

I think some of them think it is just for a research and they are participating as a participant for doing data collection or something like that.

They didn't recognise that they can use this opportunity to improve their academic writing skills and find out their weak points and I think it was not clear enough for them and they were not ambitious enough to come back and continue.

Interest in the learning community

Mona actively sought to improve her writing in various ways. Her search had started before coming to the learning community. She recalled:

I always find someone to check my writing. Even before I got admission from here I had some Kiwi friends who tried to correct my mistakes.

Before the learning community I searched for some places like research hubs or even toastmasters, I found that these places are useful for me but we can't establish our toastmasters version. I mean we can't have our own learning thing focusing on academic writing because I don't know what other hubs focus on.

Despite joining mainly to help out, after attending the sessions, Mona found the learning community an answer for what she had been seeking. Therefore, when there was talk about the future of the learning community she showed interest, although she had her doubts as the number of participants dropped near the end of the study. She reflected:

Because the number of participants were few and one of the things was that they are from different majors. I really want to continue but I don't know how.

However, seeing interest from other participants made her hopeful. She acknowledged:

I'm hopeful for this learning community especially when Farzaneh showed her interest about continuing.

Mona's interest was not limited to this specific learning community and she wanted to continue to use the cyclic nature of the meetings in her future career. Her interest was mostly focused

on sharing, as it was through sharing her writing that she felt she learned most. It could be said that Mona brought in more writing and asked for feedback more than other participants. She enjoyed getting feedback on her writing to the extent that even when the sessions finished she sent another part of her writing to the participants and facilitators, seeking feedback.

4f. The Fourth session

By the fourth session, the learning community was starting to form. The participants had started to form an understanding of what the learning community was for; they were developing trust, talking with more ease with each other, and taking some control of their learning. Professor Kate had another commitment and could not join us. A range of topics was discussed, including writing that Flora and Maria had sent in advance.

Professor Jess began the session by suggesting that participants be specific when they ask for feedback on their writing:

If you go to a learning support centre or a colleague, it makes it much easier if you say please give me feedback on *this*, rather than say: give me feedback on my writing.

She then asked each participant what they wanted from the day.

Ehsan began by requesting:

Some strategies to approach writing academic texts or articles, papers.

Professor Jess asked Ehsan to narrow it down and tried to be specific:

Is it for your content? Is it for your paragraph structure?

After some thought Ehsan explained:

For me the content is the most important part. Because sometimes I send my article and my audience gives me feedback that I had not been intending for and when we talk about the text, I realise that I have written something different or I have written in the way that it is misunderstanding, it is not what I really had in mind. All the time I have this confusion in my text because maybe I write too long sentences.

Professor Jess agreed that long sentences can create confusion, for the writer as well as the reader:

I would suggest to you start making a list. I use too long a sentence.

Flora talked about a difficulty with paraphrasing:

When paraphrasing I am not sure if use the correct words in the sentence or not.

Ehsan shared the same problem and wondered:

When we use a word, there are a lot of words that we think have more or less the same meaning and we wonder, which one suits this particular text that we are looking at?

Ahmad shared his strategy:

The way that I help myself out of this is using a collocation dictionary. If you write in a word, you need to learn about the word you are using before you start using it in a text. It's not just right clicking on synonyms and using the list of words which is 5 or 10 words. Whatever word you decide on you need to educate yourself. How it is used in a sentence, what other words come with this word and what other word does it come with it?

Majid warned against the use of bilingual dictionaries:

I think if they use English dictionary that would help them to find out what's the difference between the words that previously they thought that they were the same words.

Ahmad agreed with Majid:

I did use Arabic-English dictionary in order to learn. However this is not very helpful because sometimes I know how the word is used in Arabic in a specific context, but, the other word which is equivalent to this in English is not used in the same context and this happens a lot.

Professor Jess agreed. She also expressed caution about using the online Thesaurus:

Also good but dangerous. Because it gives you too many options.

An extended discussion followed about the use of Oxford and Cambridge dictionaries, collocation dictionaries, Grammarly, Prowriting, Corpus Linguistics, and noting how specific words are used in published articles.

After a while, Professor Jess added:

But let me make a very strong suggestion: don't rely on the tool. In other words, use it as a learning tool so you don't keep making the same mistakes. Once you've corrected something it's about prioritising that feature in your editing. For example if you have habitually written 'discuss about' and learned you don't need the *about*, actively watch out for it in your writing. Just one thing but it changes your writing. Slowly you reduce the amount of habitual errors and your work looks better.

Maria shared that she extensively used a particular linking phrase in her writing:

I use 'for this purpose' a lot, and I know all the synonyms but in most of the part of my writing 'for this purpose' seems the best phrase and I don't know what else I can use.

Different suggestions were made to address her problem. I suggested making a linking words list with their functions. Majid suggested that she could combine her sentences to reduce the need of that phrase:

Sometimes just combining small sentences helps to remove those kind of things.

Majid added he used to have the same problem:

I would always write 'for the purpose of this study I do this and that', 'for the purpose of this research I design this and that', until my supervisor said, 'you know what I don't want to see for this purpose in your writing', and then I decided not to use it. Just eliminate it from your writing. When I decided to eliminate it I was not able to immediately but I realised that I'm using it much less than before. At one level it's lack of knowledge about other alternatives. At another level it's just something that sticks in our mind.

Angy suggested using an online tool to get different ideas:

Are you using *Academic Paraphrasing*? It just saved my life because I was exactly going through the same thing. So there are a thousand ways of saying something. And you choose because it gives you the whole thing but you are the one that has to choose at the end of the day, because you are the one who knows.

At this point, Sima shared a difficulty she was facing while transcribing and translating. Sima was working with immigrant parents, some of whom were Bangladeshi and spoke her language. She conducted her interviews with them in Bangla and had to translate and then transcribe them for her study. While translating she had realised that some of her interviewees used words that did not have an equivalent in English.

Ahmad wondered about a similar issue:

When I'm transcribing they are using a lot of 'they do this' and if I left it like this maybe the reader won't understand 'they'. Can I in brackets write students? Or kids? Next to that? Or can I interpret some of their grammar mistakes and sentences. Like if they made

one or two sentences which are incorrect in grammar, and this affected the meaning. Can I interpret the meaning and say ‘she means this and that, or he means this and that’?

Professor Jess offered some things to consider:

First of all the reader has to understand it. Number two, there is a difference between what your participants say, and what you say when you talk about them because you are the academic student who is not allowed to be confused, they can be.

You have to decide what the purpose of your work is. You shouldn’t belittle their ideas by recoding all their slips. Is accuracy the most important? And if you were doing a linguistic analysis it is.

You have to explain your choices in your methodology: what you have done and why. You can do almost anything if you can explain why your reason is a good one.

Ehsan suggested that the actual transcription could be added to the appendix:

I think you should have the main way that they told as an appendix to your research for the people who are interested in the exact way they talked and words they used. But use the extraction of that sentences for your analysis or discussion.

Flora struggled with using academic vocabulary in her writing. When going through the writing she shared, Professor Jess noticed that there was a lack of explanation of the topic in her introduction:

I would quite like to know what I am going to read about here, and I would like a couple of sentences at the beginning that help me. So something like, ‘in the following pages’, or ‘in this section I will explain’ - something. You start telling me a lot of important facts, I want something here that will tell me what the facts are going to be about and why you are telling me.

Ahmad gave a follow up suggestion:

It’s like an introduction for the introduction. Like here, you have eight paragraphs, in every paragraph there is one idea. Can you take the eight and very briefly put them in one or two on top?

Angy offered Flora a piece of writing to show different kinds of and signposting, saying:

It's a road map that you present into the reader because the reader doesn't know what is going to be in the content.

Ahmad added:

It gives an arrowed map of the whole text. So for example if I read the third sentence here and it talks about 'my life', so if I want to read something about your life I will directly go to paragraph three rather than looking at paragraph one and two because I know this will come in the third place.

The abstract that Maria had sent was read next. Professor Jess queried the use of the word *points*:

Do you mean *aspects*, *elements*, *strategies* I don't know because I'm not a subject specialist here. Points doesn't feel right.

Majid and Ehsan both considered that it was informal and not precise.

After a flow of suggestions and questions Maria suggested that what she was trying to say was not a *point*, rather it was an *aim*. I shared:

Be careful with the words you use, they all have different meanings. And we were talking about them at the beginning of the session.

Reading further on Maria's work, Professor Jess then asked:

Is your study aiming to actually improve the batteries or find the information that could be used to improve the batteries?

Maria confirmed that she was working on batteries themselves and her wording was approved but commented that the difference was not one she had been aware of and that she had learned something new.

As the time was almost over, so Professor Jess asked for feedback on her facilitation. Did participants want her to give feedback or would they prefer that she talked less. Ehsan said:

Personally, I appreciate it.

Majid suggested:

We are learning from you, but it's not about you talking less, it's about others contributing more.

Ahmad reflected:

I think the immediate feedback that Angy just wants to give us is a conclusion. Sometimes you have different points of view, but you can just give us one final answer. It concludes the topic.

Finally, Professor Jess suggested participants could brainstorm another topic that we could explore in the next session, and bring in a piece of their writing.

Ahmad suggested:

If we can decide on the specific area of the thesis like literature review or...

No other suggestions were made.

To conclude, I wanted to know what each participant thought of the session and if they had any gains. Maria responded:

I learnt two strategies to eliminate 'for this purpose' and other phrases that I have used a lot.

Flora said:

About how to start the introduction to each piece of writing. It's a good point that I don't know about.

Ehsan said:

Many things but the first thing that I can tell is about the strategies to comparing the context for using particular words.

Majid reflected:

What we talked about the structure and the way that a sentence should be worded is very important.

Nima said:

I learnt about the collocation dictionary and I think that I should use it more for my thesis.

Angy acknowledged:

I'm trying to learn how to concentrate on one thing.

Ahmad said:

I've learned about the problems when your participants have language issues; that was a very big question for me.

And Sima finished off by saying:

I think it is going to be supportive as I used to do a lot of translation checking from Bangla to English.

In looking back on the session, I reflect that the participants gained confidence in not only talking about their own problems but also in giving feedback to each other and arguing the merits of a range of strategies. In the first session, it had been me and the facilitators who had engaged in the participatory action research. In this session, all the participants had joined in: making suggesting, reflecting, and, to an extent, planning further work, both for future group sessions and for improving their own individual writing.

4g. Angy' Story

Wanting feedback

Angy is Colombian and her doctoral research is in Education, focusing on teachers' pedagogical practices. In Columbia, she was an English language teacher. She held a very critical attitude towards her own writing, freely acknowledging the difficulties she faces and always looking for the best solution. She firmly stated:

I kind of know what my problems are, when it comes to writing.

One of Angy's important needs that she pursued was immediate feedback. She reflected:

The thing is that I believe in immediate feedback. That is why I needed a break from teaching because when my students come to me, even if it is one o'clock in the morning, I answer, I reply straight away.

Angy presents herself as a person with a genuinely passionate interest in learning and practicing the skills she sees as important for her study. Initially she joined the learning community to help me as the researcher but she then continued with the hope of learning and improving her writing. Recalling her thoughts before joining she said:

Let's see if I can improve my writing or if I can get better techniques in order to do my writing more effectively or to take on the task of writing more effectively.

However, Angy attended only the first half of the learning community and did not continue. She acknowledged:

Because of personal reasons... I had to drop out.

Nevertheless, in the first half of the study, she was mostly present and participated actively.

Academic writing developments

A key difficulty that Angy faced was expressing her ideas in writing in a coherent and cohesive way, which she initially referred to as 'writer's block'. She noted that she did not have the same problem in Spanish. She explained:

Sometimes I read my writing and I say: why doesn't it sound sophisticated as it would sound in Spanish?

Angy's comment about writing in Spanish highlights a dilemma many international students experience. The structural conventions, idioms and metaphor of our native languages do not readily translate into English and we often feel clumsy in trying to find corresponding expressions in English.

Professor Kate, wanting to check Angy's understanding of her problem, suggested a definition of writer's block to her:

Writer's block is when you really can't find what you want to say at all.

After some thought, Angy changed the name of her difficulty to English block, which for her meant putting sentences together. She clarified:

I had the idea, I knew what I wanted to say but I just couldn't find a way to put the sentence together.

In her view, there were two reasons for this, one was lack of vocabulary and the other was the non-native speaker's hesitancy. She cited a world-Englishes theorist to explain:

Krashen talks about the fact that because you are not a native speaker, you always have to doubt what you say and the way you say it and if the way you write it is actually correct.

Angy acknowledged that she did use some strategies such as focusing on clarity and conciseness or as she expressed it:

It's taking the paragraph and saying: is the idea clear? I mean what I could cut down?

Angy explained that, to be able to make her writing more precise, she would walk away from her writing and reread it again after some time, often ending up in eliminating extra words. However, she used other strategies too. She added:

I'm actually working on that with a native speaker that I'm paying.

With the native speaker as teacher, Angy would tell him what she had in mind and get help in writing in a more coherent way. The native speaker was able to give her the immediate feedback that she needed. She explained:

The way he goes and says, you should rephrase it like this and put this word here instead of here.

For Angy this feedback was a necessary part of her writing process. She clarified:

As part of my process, it is important for me to share, to get someone to read my paper, whatever I'm going to do, before I submit.

Professor Kate gave her another suggestion:

Jot down dot points, crazily type everything that you could think of and then work from words on the page to then create the sentences.

Professor Jess followed up Professor Kate's suggestion:

If you bullet point them, it forces you to deal with them one at a time.

Suggesting a tool for this, Professor Jess further added:

On a PowerPoint, you've got to only put a few words on each screen and that kind of forces you to structure it.

Another idea suggested by Professor Kate, which Angy agreed she did use, was to record herself talking about her ideas.

As I reflect on this exchange I find it interesting that Angy called her problem writer block, whereas from her description I would have called it a struggle with sequencing and expressing ideas. It prompts me to begin to think further about the kinds of *blocks* second language speakers experience. While this is beyond the scope of my current study it is something I would like to explore further.

Using the I voice

In one session Angy reflected that she had difficulty using the first person, *I*, and would always try to use the passive voice. She reported that it had been brought to her attention by her supervisors that her experience was important and needed to be included. She explained:

Having said that, my introduction was totally formal, based on facts but then I added a little bit of that *I*. You have to be careful.

A discussion followed on the use of the personal pronouns '*I*' in writing. Ahmad suggested:

It depends on the paradigm that you are following and it depends on the methodology of your study.

Professor Kate, agreeing with him, added:

People who do phenomenology talk about bracketing out their personal observations, their personal thinking about a topic. Whereas in other forms of qualitative research people deliberately want to draw on their personal observations and thinking about the topic. So it really does depend.

Professor Kate, emphasising what worked for her might not work for others, shared her own decisions about the use of first person pronouns in writing:

For me, some chapters were written in the first person but others weren't. Because there were somethings that I really couldn't write about from a personal perspective but there were somethings that I could.

Angy did not seem included to push the discussion further and seemed happy that she was finding her own way to revolve her preference for the passive and her supervisor's encouragement to use *I* and voice her perspectives. I wonder if some of the reason for the difference is in the varying localised traditions of academic writing. I did my earlier study in a tradition that preferred third person and passives. Some fields in science also seem to prefer third person and passives. In addition Professor Kate's comments prompt me to think further about how different epistemological approaches view knowledge and the place of personal perceptions within what is considered useful knowledge. So the writing issue Angy raised seems to be more than a technical one: it is about the kind of meaning that is being made.

Need for immediate feedback

As she acknowledged, one of Angy's needs was to get immediate feedback. She said:

I feel the need to somehow get immediate feedback, about what I am doing, if I'm doing that correctly.

It is the immediate feedback; I want to know it there. That is the problem with me.

The participants were supportive and tried to offer Angy strategies that could help her need of immediate feedback. Ahmad suggested the idea of working with colleagues to get immediate feedback but recognised that:

They might, by the way, give you wrong information or misguide you, this is a risky scenario. But, this is something that can get you out of this moment of frustration.

Angy also acknowledged that colleagues were easy to contact and get feedback from, but said she did not feel comfortable going to them, as she did not like to disturb others. To make it easier to get feedback from others, Professor Kate suggested selecting small chunks:

The chances are that you get a pretty quick answer because reading just a paragraph doesn't take that long.

Ahmad made another suggestion:

Look at it another time when you are more comfortable and under less stress.

Angy, agreeing, reflected that she would go back to her writing when she was less stressed and had an open mind. Elaborating on her experience, she noted:

I always end up saying: that's probably not all right, that's the best I can do but is that good enough?

The writing process is a constant process of learning; so you are always learning.

Angy repeatedly expressed her belief that through getting feedback she was able to learn and improve.

The role of the discussion and the conclusion in writing

In one session, discussion centred around the different ways personal opinion might feature in various parts of the thesis. Participants talked about whether they could ever freely express their own opinions, and particularly whether they could do so in the discussion and conclusion chapters.

Angy queried one participant's comments about the use of 'hedging'. She acknowledged that she had difficulty in knowing when she could assert something directly and when she should be more tentative.

Professor Jess then explained tentativeness as critically looking at alternative interpretations, reflecting:

Depends how much evidence you have. Sometimes you're right to be assertive; sometimes you are not.

She further emphasised that interpretations needed more tentativeness than did observations. Further, she argued that what can be done is to look at an aspect from different perspectives, questioning whether other interpretations are possible.

Professor Kate added that to make more concrete interpretations on discussing data, the relation of the data to other research should be evident:

You need to check if it's logical to have made the interpretive statements that you have and, therefore, sometimes your language becomes less moderate or less tentative.

She added:

It's not just about the language you use, it's about the evidence, the context, and the complexity of your interpretation.

Angy acknowledged her difficulty in knowing how to change her approach in writing different sections of her thesis. She asked:

What happens in the discussion, would this [careful avoidance of sweeping assertions] be the type of language you use in the discussion?

Professor Jess suggested that there is no definite method of dealing with discussion, and that discussions and conclusions could be written in different ways, such as:

Some people will have a discussion chapter; some people will have discussion all the way through either at the end of each chapter or even more integrated.

Further, Professor Kate argued that conclusions drawn in the concluding chapter should be based on findings discussed in the discussion. The data found in the discussion should be a matter of fact that could be relied on and might not need tentative language. However, there might still be tentative statements about which more research is needed. Such statements could be added to the *Where to from here?* or *Further studies* section and where one could state the issues they were not sure of and suggest further study. She explained:

That's where you might talk about some of the things that you aren't sure about, what the finding means and that you would suggest.

Culture and writing

When others in the group talked about discipline differences in approach to writing between fields of study, Angy agreed there were differences:

We in the Humanities are more verbal, so verbalism is there, whereas they, in the sciences, are more exact and more to the point.

However, she saw being very verbal as one of her problems. She talked about the ways in which her cultural background impacted on her writing. Coming from a South American culture, she said, made her personality full of emotions and energy. She elaborated:

Unlike you, I do have a problem with my cultural background. I'm Latin American, so emotions flow, and words flow too.

Angy reflected that she usually did not get straight to the point, but tended to give extended explanations. She felt that tendency created a style that her supervisors criticised and she felt the need to repress her tendency to be spontaneous and exuberant. Members of the group, however, argued she should be careful not to lose her own voice.

Dealing with disappointment

Over the course of her time as a member of the learning community, Angy suffered several disappointments. One of the biggest occurred when Angy emailed a piece of writing to all the participants and did not receive immediate feedback. She explained:

I learned that feedback is really important for me because when there was not the feedback that really upset me.

She emailed a copy of her application for a vacation course on 1st December, well in time for the meeting ten days later. She asked for critiques on how she described her research and how she presented herself. Unfortunately, both facilitators were away at an international conference that week and did not access their email. For various other reasons none of the student participants opened her email before the meeting. When the meeting began, her email was retrieved and, since this was the first piece of writing that had been sent electronically to the group, there was an initial struggle in finding a way to place it on screen in the zoom programme and at the same time show the faces of those who discussed it. Some feedback was given but it was somewhat piecemeal as no-one had read the full document in advance and had been able to really think about it intentions. Angy expressed her disappointment:

I wanted you guys to read my whole paper, there was no time for that, not there. Even if you told me this was all rubbish that was what I had asked for.

Timing had been part of the problem, as had inexperience with the capabilities of the technology. However, as I reflect on Angy's disappointment, I think that the biggest problem was that we had not adequately clarified ways that writing could be shared and how much time participants would give to looking at each other's work outside meeting times. Perhaps there was also a further problem in that Angy's application was already fairly polished and so some of the participants did not know what kind of feedback they could give.

The overall nature of feedback within the group was also a frustration for Angy. On the one hand, she considered it positive to have diverse participants from different fields. On the other hand, she found that the diversity made some of the discussion less relevant for her:

When they were giving feedback, for example when the engineers were giving feedback to each other, they kind of understood what they were talking about with each other but for me it didn't make any sense.

While she recognised that concern with improving writing was a common goal, she was uncomfortable with the range of different interests:

We were all writing that's what united us, that was the commonality in the community but we all had our own issues and that made all of us to work towards something specifically or be there for a specific reason.

In her final debrief Angy stated that she had not gained any new ideas, arguing:

There was not a strategy that I can say: this was new.

She also stated that she felt that her areas of interest were different from the rest of the group. The topics discussed, she felt, were more on surface errors and not what she was looking for. She recognised a lack of alignment with her own interests, which was more to do with content, noting that:

In my particular case it didn't work for me as I was looking to get some sort of feedback, which I didn't get.

However, she also acknowledged that she might have found the group more useful if she had been able to continue participating. Her leaving the group, she said, was not caused by dissatisfaction but by a death in the family that made her leave New Zealand for a time.

Nevertheless, she had some further criticism of the first sessions. Like some others, she thought there needed to be more structure:

Definitely, there needs to be more structure. If this sort of exercise was to be repeated there will need to be better structure to maximise time.

She suggested that part of the structure should consist of a period of time directly led by the facilitators:

It should be like 20 or 30 minutes to talk about something specifically that the two professors thought we needed.

I return to the issue of structure and its role within a learning Community in Chapter Five.

Validation by the facilitators

When asked whom she learned most from, she said:

Especially the professors, they were very valid and it's something that I already knew but it was important to hear them.

Validation by those she considered as knowledgeable and trustworthy was most important to her, she acknowledged:

I also learnt that my techniques were validated by some of the suggestions that the professors had given.

Angy's statement is at odds with what Professor Kate states in her own reflections: that all members of the community contributed to the discussions with the community and so to the development of trust and space for learning. The difference between the two perspectives highlights the different ways authority is viewed and the different expectations that participants brought to the group.

Angy strongly affirmed she valued getting the facilitators' feedback and suggested that at least part of the value consisted in validating her own views. She then reiterated her desire to receive feedback:

I verify that feedback is really important for me and that I'm always going to stick to it.

Finally, Angy affirmed that despite her disappointments and her disrupted attendance, she was not put off and saw potential in the concept of learning community. She stated:

I would create a learning community. Yes, I would. I like the idea.

4h. Majid's Story

Learning about his own students

Majid is an Iranian PhD graduate from the University of Canterbury. I had come to know him and his wife through Diba, as they were family. Studying science, all his research had been conducted quantitatively. Explaining his research, he said:

I studied Biomedical Engineering. It's all about application of physics and Engineering for medical equipment.

Majid had graduated over a year ago and is now working at the university supervising students. Joining the group enabled him to share some of his students' difficulties, in particular those who had English as an additional language. Having finished his study, like several of the others, Majid joined the learning community to help a compatriot. However, as he continued his participation Majid found other reasons for belonging. He recalled:

After the first session, I noticed that this is a good opportunity for me and everyone in the team to learn something; even if we know some of the things you need to discuss them and put them in practice.

Majid found use in the learning community for his own work too. He added:

When we finish our PhDs, we are still in contact with scientists and experts in our field so we still need to keep practicing academic writing and communicating our ideas in writing in a right way.

Majid's comments emphasise that developing skill in academic writing is not only a necessity doctoral studies but also a means to shape a career and participate in the sharing of knowledge and interpretations of knowledge. His desire to continue to improve his writing resonates with the repeated comments by both professors that they too are continuously learners and their acknowledgement that they still struggle with transferring their ideas onto the page.

Issues Majid brought to the group

Majid joined the study halfway through the sessions, therefore it took him time to adapt. As he had finished his study, he did not have any writing to share. He recalled:

At the time, we were having these sessions I was not actively writing something, like a paper.

However, he shared some of the difficulties that he had faced when writing his thesis. He recounted:

In some cases, I remember that when I sent a chapter of my thesis I had written, for example, *which* instead of *that*.

In the feedback Majid had received from his supervisor, the words were crossed and replaced. Further, Majid explained that during the time he was learning English, he had been told that *that* should be used in the first part of a sentence and *which* in the second part. A discussion followed that many of the participants contributed to, some adding they too were uncertain about whether there were any clear rules. Professor Kate reflected that they were usually interchangeable and that it was more a matter of stylistic preference. Another issue Majid raised was that he had been criticised for the overuse of comparative adverbs in his writing. Having raised the problem, he then reflected about the reason for the criticism:

My field is a bit more technical: they expected me to produce numbers and values.

Majid's reflection on his own query is one illustration of something that occurred quite often in the group: the voicing of a problem to people who were actively listening seemed to allow the speaker to move beyond the sense of blocking the problem caused and begin to think about the problem from a different perspective. As Ahmad also pointed out, it was not always the advice of others that provided new insights: sometimes they came simply through talking about a concern.

While reading the writing Angy shared Majid raised a question regarding the difference between the use of *would* and *will*. Interestingly, Majid followed up by answering his own question, explaining that it is dependent on the writing intention. Regarding *will* he explained:

So, this is something certain, so it will provide opportunity or offer but in a sense that Angy is not part of it yet it could be *would*.

The issues Majid raised during the sessions were apparently about such minor differences of usage. What is perhaps more interesting is that the way members of the group contributed to the discussion, offering suggestions and strategies and the way Majid himself worked through the problems he raised. The sharing of ideas was important.

Other students' difficulties

Majid reported that while giving feedback to other members of the group, he had picked up some of the writing issues they faced, and found they gave him insights both into his own students' difficulties and the role he could take in helping them.

Within a session, he noted that a particular difficulty for those with English as an additional language was with organisation of their writing.

I found out that for people that English is their second language, it is really hard for them to put forward ideas in the right order and they usually get everything mixed up.

An interesting discussion followed in which several participants talked about their frustrations with the ways that ideas seemed to make sense until they tried to put them into written words. Farzaneh reflected:

When it is not your first language, sometimes you're worried about the second language and then you forget about the ideas and get them mixed up.

The discussion turned to the difficulty of putting ideas down in a meaningful sequence. Majid acknowledged he also had the same problem, sharing his useful strategy of using brainstorming. He reflected:

I have some similar problems sometimes, to write down the ideas and make them in the right order. So first I brainstorm, write down the ideas.

He then turned the conversation to the students he was supervising:

Would that be a good strategy for my students or for us?

Professor Jess suggested some strategies for writing with a logical progression. She proposed having a plan with bullet points, drawing mind maps, making bubbles and connecting them, spider diagrams, or using PowerPoint. In relation to PowerPoint she explained:

The thing about a PowerPoint is that you've got to limit the number of words on each screen with bullet points. It's encouraging to put a little heading on top of each slide. That means you plan all your ideas instead of just starting to write.

Professor Jess suggested that it might be good for Majid to give face-to-face feedback to his students.

It would be better to sit with them, with the ones who have written something and communicate with them about the issue in their writings rather than just leaving a comment as they may or may not understand that.

She added:

Sometimes say to them today I am only looking at one thing. I'm only going to mark your logic, I'm not going to correct any punctuation or anything else.

Majid showed that he was eager to take the advice. He later reported that he applied the advice to the way he dealt with his students. He shared his experience:

It seemed that the student was really happy with this approach but I didn't get another edition of that writing so I cannot tell you how effective it was.

In the sessions he attended, Majid actively contributed to the group's shifting through ideas and understandings. In doing so, he clarified some of his own understandings. Equally important, he found that the discussion within the group gave him new understandings of the problems his own students were facing. His experience, like the comments of Professor Jess reported in a later section, suggests that a learning community can be valuable to those supervising doctoral students as well as those who are struggling to write their theses.

Culture, relationships, and field of study

One aspect that made Majid comfortable in sharing his ideas were the facilitators. This was not similar to his experience in Iran. There, he felt, relationships were constrained by a sense of respect for teachers and the operation of hierarchy. In the final debrief he said:

Professors don't see themselves at the same level as students, they don't sit around the same table so that students can easily discuss with them and get their ideas but that was totally different here.

He accentuated the difference between what he experienced in the learning community and his previous academic experience. Having professors as informal facilitators was initially surprising but it helped him feel at ease. He added:

I felt comfortable sharing my ideas and what I experienced.

In relation to fields of study, he came to the conclusion that different fields of study view writing differently. Regarding science, he stated:

Well I think we view it almost the same way but because of the structure of writing a thesis in Education and in science and in humanity, these are different.

However, being exposed to these differences in the learning community allowed him to get a variety of ideas. He added:

We had the chance to discuss all of these things and hear different ideas, listen to everyone's ideas and experience.

His report that he could utilise what he learned in the community with his own students suggests that differences between fields in expectations for academic writing were not as extensive as some participants suggested and that in fact many aspects were relevant to both science and Humanities.

Overall view of the learning community

Fully participating in every session was not attainable for Majid as he was busy with his daily life, work, and family. Majid did not have any current writing to present, so he shared his thesis experience, some of the difficulties he still had, and some that he had observed from his students. He stated:

If I was still involved in writing my thesis, definitely I would definitely have had immediate issues to bring to the group to discuss.

However, Majid reported that just by joining the discussions he was able to benefit from the points of view and suggestions of all the participants, though he considered that he learned more from the facilitators. He said:

Mostly I learnt from the comments that I was getting or the approaches that I was given about a specific issue from participants and mostly the facilitators.

Perhaps it was because he now saw himself as a supervisor of students that Majid felt he learned mostly from the facilitators. It seemed he saw them as a guide to the way he could work with his own students. He remarked that one of the qualities he liked was their commitment to supporting the students:

You really like everyone to improve their English and the way that they write.

Nevertheless, he empathised his desire to learn from everyone:

If I hear from you, from your supervisors, from others. I can judge myself, which approach to take, and try that one.

Majid stated that the environment of the learning community allowed different topics to be raised and was supportive persuaded him to share his ideas as it seemed to do for others:

I saw how friendly everyone was in this group and that really helped everyone to share whatever they had in mind and whatever their experience was which was great.

As he reflected on his attitude to change and improvement, he added:

Most of the time I try to put forward what I have problem with and what I don't understand so I can get help from others.

In his debrief, Majid discussed how participation in the community had allowed him to learn about and from himself. He talked about the importance of discussion and how it could crystallise thinking and lead towards taking different approaches or actions. He explained:

When you raise an issue you have some ideas yourself, so probably most of the time, you are not learning from what you are saying yourself unless after having a discussion you come up with something as an approach.

He explained the ways things worked for him:

So little by little, once you discuss things it's like bringing things that are at the back of your head you bring them forward and you can get them to work.

Concerns and suggestions

During the study some participants suddenly dropped out, which for Majid became a concern. He raised:

We had some of the people that left, didn't continue coming, some other people who were coming and going.

While accepted the flexibility that allowed participants to leave, he expected participants to be committed and provide an explanation for dropping out. He reflected:

I know it's not really nice that somebody just leaves the group without saying anything.

They could simply, for example if somebody couldn't come, just contact Mir and tell him what the reason was.

Majid considered himself a committed person and expected the same from others, and in his view, commitment was not just limited to attendance. He argued:

It's not about the structure itself but the participants need to be more active. That includes myself.

Though he said he was aware of the limitations imposed by the nature of the group in dealing with participants' attendance, he thought more was required. He reflected:

You cannot force them to do that but you should make it more interesting for them somehow so they get encouraged.

Majid had some ideas in getting participants involved more. He suggested:

One of the ways is that everyone participates in putting something in writing so they could get feedback from everyone.

He further added:

The flexibility was good, I liked it, but it might have been better that we could have had a schedule or syllabus or programme.

Having a syllabus had different benefits in his view. He stated:

During the week, we could think about these things and come up with the problems that we had and may have forgotten.

He followed up by adding:

We are all busy so we could come to this learning community with more ideas because we had a chance to think about what is going to be discussed.

As I reflect on Majid's comments, I wrestle with two competing thoughts. On the one hand, I am aware that other student participants also recommended a more fixed agenda and it is possible that greater structure could give participants more security. On the other hand, I wonder if a fixed programme would make the sessions into a set of tutorials, and so counteract what the participants who continued to come seemed to value most: the opportunity to share thoughts informally with professors and other students. This is a tension I will return to in the final chapter.

Future plans

Concerning the current learning community, Majid stated he was not able to continue his participation physically after the study, due to his existing priorities. He said:

Really nice idea of continuing these sessions but from my own personal view for myself, it may not work.

However, Majid did show interest in continuing the learning community online and deemed it a need. He reflected:

When we finish our PhDs, we are still in contact with scientists and experts in our field so we still need to keep practicing academic writing.

They can send me their writings and I can send my writings to others and gather feedback so little by little we can correct ourselves.

Additionally, Majid showed interest in establishing a learning community in the future. He reflected:

I would like to establish one in the future, but based on my needs.

Defining his needs, he said:

If I have a number of students or colleagues that we are working all on the same thing, so there would be a need for having such a thing.

However, in his view a learning community could be easily established. He added:

If you are sitting with some of your colleagues having lunch and you discuss something it's like a learning community.

According to Majid's definition, the groups he had been part of at work were considered learning communities. There were others that he may have joined. He affirmed:

I'm not part of that group at the moment, but I may be in the future, in our team because we are manufacturing some product, doing research and development for that.

Explaining how such a group might operate, he said:

Everyone who wants to submit something they need to submit it to this committee first and get their ideas and comments first.

Through participation in this project, Majid became familiar with the concept of a learning community. He reported that he valued the sharing of ideas and approaches and the ways discussions helped him answer some of his own questions. He had thoughts of establishing one in his future work.

4i. Vida's Story

I don't know my problem

Vida is an Iranian Ph.D. student who was nearing her confirmation at the time of the study. She introduced herself:

I'm in Chemical Engineering. I have been in New Zealand for eight months.

Vida became aware of the study through Maria and like several others joined to help a compatriot. Before coming to the learning community, Vida had sought feedback on her writing from both her supervisor and a friend. She said:

I just send my material to my supervisor and he commented on it.

I send my abstracts or my proposal to [a friend] and he just give me a small feedback, not too much.

When she joined the learning community, she realised that she could also seek feedback on her writing from this group and so she continued. She acknowledged:

I carried on coming because I think I have problem in writing especially grammatical problems because my structure has some problems so I decided to solve it. And then I got some feedback and stopped coming.

She reported later that when she received the feedback she was after, there were no reasons for her to continue and therefore she dropped out.

Academic writing development

From the beginning, Vida was aware of some of the writing issues she was facing. She said:

My supervisor told me that I have a lot of grammatical problems and I think I write very simple and informal not academically. My grammar is very poor and weak and you know I cannot write appropriate sentences. I write very simple and this is my problem, simple words, and simple grammar.

Vida reported that did not feel comfortable about her writing, but she was not certain what the specific problems were. Initially she talked generally about her problems and mentioned that she had received feedback from her supervisor that made her aware her writing was not up to expectations. She said:

I don't use introduction and most of the time I use very simple sentence but my supervisor change it to very beautiful sentence and this is my problem that I write very simple.

She added:

For example, I use *which* a lot in my sentences, and he said don't use *which*.

Then she explained her supervisor had re-written her report as a model she should work from. She acknowledged:

I think my supervisor writes very beautiful but I can't and I don't know how to improve my writing, because he always says improve your writing and I don't know how.

Vida's use of the word *beautiful* reflects her confusion about the changes her supervisor made. She focused on her use of *which* as a connecting word and noted that it did not occur in his version. Otherwise she acknowledged she did not know how to make her writing more like his. Her repetition of the word *beautiful* suggests she recognised that there was clarity and flow in his version. Her description of her writing as *simple* suggests while she thought she had covered the basic facts something was missing. When she was asked in the group about what those changes were, she said:

Sometimes he explains more than I do. I use small and simple sentences.

She followed by recalling how her supervisor had justified the changes he made:

He said that I understand what you want to say but others can't understand, so I change your sentence.

For the learning community to better understand Vida's writing issues and the reasons for changes made by her supervisor, she was asked to share an original piece of writing and the revised version. In the email to which she attached the documents, she wrote:

I sent two writings, one of them is mine but one of them has been revised by my supervisor, because of this I sent both of them. He only told me improve your writing but I don't know how.

At the beginning of the next session, she explained what her writing was about, she said:

I work with hotline lab as you have seen in my report and I have to write a report for them every week.

Going through her writing, Ahmad tried to elaborate on the supervisor's changes. He said:

He is trying to tie ideas together rather than putting one idea next to the other. He is just trying to use connectors like since, and then you see a comma here and then another idea.

Professor Jess discussed the supervisor's revisions on Vida's vocabulary. She reflected that her supervisor explains more than Vida does and through feedback, he was trying to tell her to define specific terms that are not known to all. Professor Jess reflected:

I don't think he is criticising your vocabulary. He is saying: make what you mean absolutely, unmistakably explicit.

Ahmad had further ideas on ways Vida could improve her knowledge of academic vocabulary. He explained:

I think the easiest thing is to go and read. Either read other reports or other dissertations done by other students, maybe read more academic articles or books that are related in your field so this can back you up in a way or another with a lexicon that you can use.

Jess then picked out an ungrammatical use of an idiom. She said:

The experiment went as unexpected is something you can't say, it's not an English idiom. And this is just something about learning them.

Vida then identified that her supervisor had sometimes changed her use of the word *step* to *stage*. She admitted:

I don't know what the difference between *stage* and *step* is.

Reading through the supervisor's version of the report Professor Jess tried to define the words to make the meaning clear:

The *step* is when you do that action, a *stage* is a stage in the process.

Professor Kate added:

He has actually reduced the number of words down to make those steps clear.

Then Vida pointed out that her supervisor had changed her use of brackets. Both Vida and her supervisor had bracketed words and phrases, but what was bracketed was different in each version. Professor Jess talked through the differences, encouraging Vida to consider the key elements in the report. She said:

He is saying the key element, like what is being done, what the process is, and what the conditions are, have to be stated factors.

A discussion followed in which the group compared the items in brackets and how the bracketing affected the flow of the meaning.

Members of the group then made comments about the style of writing that should be used in a report. Angy suggested:

It should be straightforward without so much wording, you need to cut down and go to the point.

Professor Jess then turned to the verbs. She pointed out that the supervisor used the past tense, as the processes discussed had already been done. Vida had used a future tense and a directive tone. Professor Jess reflected:

I notice what you were doing, you were reporting but you were writing it as an instruction.

Another issue that Angy identified was the logical order of events. Vida's writing seemed to have stepped out of order. Giving an example of one of the changes to Vida's report, Angy said:

There is difference because preheat is something that you do before you heat.

Ahmad also tried to explain the change Vida's supervisor had made in reporting the steps in the experiment logically. He reflected:

From the first experiment to the second one there is a clear focus on cohesion, he is trying to get the ideas running smoothly in the second experiment.

To help in sorting out the order of events in a report, Ahmad suggested using bullet points. He explained:

Bullet points is one of the academic conventions of writing a report.

As the group went through the two versions, they identified a succession of specific features that made the supervisors' version more clear and cohesive and so helped to deconstruct Vida's summation of *beautiful*.

Professor Jess emphasised that Vida should not consider the supervisor's feedback as just correction; rather she should consider them as learning. Jess said:

For me the biggest things are that these changes are content and process he is teaching. During our final interview, Vida acknowledged that she had implemented all the feedback she received. She recounted:

I changed my writing as they mentioned. I explained more. For example, I write more about what I want to do. I used the comments to write a new report and I think it worked.

Vida also added that her supervisors reflected on the changes she had made. She recalled:

My supervisor told me you have progress.

Impressions of the learning community

Vida was only present for three sessions in the learning community, but she made reflections based on her experience. For her there were aspects that she liked and ones that she thought could change. She reported:

I like the flexibility, but you are just dependent on students' writing and I think you shouldn't be like this.

She added:

I think you should manage it better and you should have had a schedule or structure and every session work on specific structure.

In her view, I should have taken a more central role. However, she liked the flexibility, as she was able to drop out. She said:

It was good because it wasn't compulsory for us.

When discussing writing Vida had noticed that fields of study differ from one another. She said:

Those who were in Humanities were more professional. Writing is more important and I think you can write better. I'm engineer and I don't need to write too much or I don't need to communicate with people as much as you.

She added that she thought similarities in fields would be more beneficial and thought the learning community should be more homogenous. She explained:

We could understand each other better when we give each other feedback.

In the learning community, she learned from listening to both participants and facilitators. She said:

I learnt from both the participants and facilitators together.

But learning was more effective for her when there was a piece of writing. She added:

I learn both from discussions on my writing and participants' writings.

Ultimately, Vida felt comfortable sharing her writing with the community. When asked about establishing a learning community in the future, she responded:

Yeah I really like this that would be great.

However, at the time and due to her studies she was very busy and could not find the time to participate in any learning community.

As I reflect on Vida's comments, I become more aware of the multiple and complex needs of international students. While Vida stated that she did gain from the feedback she received, nevertheless, her comments indicate that she would have appreciated more regular and strategically structured help with her writing. It is also evident that she had trouble in identifying exactly what her supervisor required from her, and that verbal explanation was needed to make clear why specific changes had been made to the report she had initially written. The possible gap between what supervisors expect and what students understand will be further discussed in the final chapter.

4j. Maria's Story

Maria is an Iranian Ph.D. student studying Chemical Engineering. Initially she was working towards getting her confirmation. She reported:

Finally, I presented my report but still my writing needs some improvement for my confirmation, because I didn't have enough time to write for my confirmation. I just did lots of experiments.

Maria also joined the learning community to help a compatriot as well as having some interest in the topic. She said:

Well the first session I think was productive to persuade me to keep on coming. And mostly I was thinking maybe I can be useful in your project. I was mostly curious how it will work and was wondering if it can help me with my writing in any way.

She attended most sessions and introduced the study to other Iranian students in her school. Vida, Amin, Flora, and Nima were notified of the learning community through Maria. She did not attend the last few sessions, however, explaining her reason, she said:

I was so busy, I couldn't take my time to come. I really tried but I couldn't.

Academic writing development

Maria identified her search for perfectionism as a main cause of difficulty in her writing:

I was so perfectionist and I tried to find the best words and grammars; it just stopped me from writing.

While writing, Maria looked for words that she had in mind in her own language and could not find an equivalent word for them in English; therefore she had to improvise. She explained the result:

It makes me describe something that in my language is just in one word with a sentence, but it works.

Maria also reflected that she did not always know the exact meaning and use of words and phrases and ended up overusing a phrase. She said:

I know all the synonyms but in most parts of my writing 'for this purpose' is the best phrase and I don't know what else I can use.

Ahmad thought that repetition of a phrase was due to two reasons. One was lack of knowledge and the other he explained:

The other level is sometimes the phrase sticks in our minds.

Different suggestions were made for dealing with this. Ahmad shared his experience of the same problem and stated he had decided to gradually eliminate the repetition of certain phrases from his writing. Agreeing with Ahmad, Professor Jess advised Maria:

You don't need to eliminate it but you can halve it. But if you set out to halve it, you have to challenge each one.

Majid gave Maria another suggestion. He said:

Sometimes just combining small sentences helps to remove those kind of things like, *for this purpose*. For example, *to model this*, we do this.

Reflecting on my own experience, I shared a list of linking words that she could have on her wall and refer to when writing. Angy suggested a website she had been using for paraphrasing where you were able to choose between different alternatives. Describing the website, she said:

I could say this or that instead, and you choose because it gives you the whole thing but you are the one that has to choose at the end of the day.

Sharing her writing

In one of the sessions, Maria decided to share her writing as she wanted feedback. She explained:

I just bring it; maybe you can find a problem.

Going through her writing, the learning community made some reflections. Ahmad noticed that Maria had used *for this purpose* to show effect and suggested that she could use *therefore* instead. Professor Jess further noted:

What's missing is signposting.

Professor Jess further explained that signposting would help the flow of writing:

If you signpost then you know if your structure is logical. If you said you are going to discuss something, then you have a perfect check whether you've done it. If you've done something else that you prefer, then you go back and rewrite the signpost.

Majid also proposed that Maria could acknowledge the reader with a brief initial explanation of what she intended to write about. He added:

If you aim at doing something and your reader knows nothing about that it does not help with the flow and understanding.

Going through her writing in another session, Professor Jess brought to Maria's attention a lack of consistency in capitalising her subheadings. She asked:

Why do you have a capital letter for "Patterning"? I'm picking that because I notice that often people are inconsistent in subheadings. They give some words a capital and some others not, especially in subheadings.

Further, Professor Jess added that she had used abbreviations that may create ambiguity for the reader. She then explained her own practice with abbreviations:

My rule of thumb is to tell the reader once in each chapter what an abbreviation stands for. An examiner might put your thesis down for a week between reading one chapter and another.

Maria found getting feedback on her writing useful, but thought it would not be possible to get feedback on everything that was a problem. She concluded:

I think the best way to learn is you discover your mistakes yourself. I mean read your text and try to correct it. I just google a sentence and similar sentences come up and I just find out my errors or when I have a grammatical problem I just start to study about that type of grammar and then try to fix all of my sentences that are like in that time.

She acknowledged that when she sought feedback, it was always from a specific group. She said:

I always try to get feedback from native people, native English speakers.

Field of study

In Maria's view, different fields of study approach academic writing in different ways. Talking to me, she said:

I think in your field writing plays a more important role, while in my field we are following a structure to write.

Listening to the discussions, she reflected:

It is a bit different in my major because I have never written any personal observation. It was all experiments that have been done by people. During our discussion, I was trying to make a connection between these type of writing to my thesis or writings relevant to my major, but I actually couldn't because it's totally different.

Reflecting on her experience, she added:

I mostly follow a structure, it's not like I say all the people in my field follow the same structure but that structure works for me. We don't play with the words or grammar a lot. It's mostly the scientific part of the writing that is important.

In another session, there was a discussion on referencing and how it is carried out in Sciences and Humanities. Those in Humanities shared that they used the APA system when referencing, but when Maria was asked about their style, she responded:

We don't care actually.

According to her, there was no set style; rather standards were set by their supervisors.

What she found lacking in the learning community

Because of the flexible structure of the learning community, Maria did not feel obliged to participate. She explained:

You know after a few sessions I felt that I didn't have anything to say. I used to come there, and I would see that the question is 'what is your problem, or if you have any piece of writing to share?' It was in a way that I didn't feel that I have to be prepared for that or that I have to do anything for that.

The learning community was based on asking participants about the difficulties they were facing and for them to select the topic of the sessions. Maria on the other hand thought that the topics of each session should have come from me. She said:

It needs to change the structure, because in the community it was like, always we were asked what are the barriers that exist in front of your writing and then we were discussing it.

She added:

I felt that you didn't have a plan for that or maybe it's the way of your project.

She suggested:

For example, if we were asked to write about a topic, about the same topic, all of us then you could have compared our works and compared the ways that people write. After each session, you can again ask people to write about another topic but the same topic for all and make a comparison or you can ask to write about the same topic as before and see how people changed their writing.

This suggestion by Maria corresponds with suggestions made by several other participants who had expected, and wanted, more direct teaching. To some extent, I see this as a reflection of their previous learning experiences. However, I also realise, in retrospect, that I myself did not fully understand the evolving nature of a learning community at the time I sent out the invitation and the information sheet. I discuss both these issues further in Chapter Five.

Maria further reiterated her expectation of structured teaching and of reliable assessment of improvement:

It should be like a class, but I think a way to track people's performance would be effective.

What she found useful

Maria acknowledged that after receiving the feedback and listening to others talk about their writing issues, she became more aware of her writing. She said:

Well I mostly learnt from others' experiences and I liked the time that everybody discussed the piece of writings.

The sharing of writing was one of the most effective ways that Maria learned in the sessions, both from her own writing and that of others. She recalled:

When it was my turn, my writing, I really enjoyed it and I was looking for some drawbacks but I couldn't get much. Maybe if I had much drawbacks I would have enjoyed it more. I mostly learnt from people's experiences and the part that they discussed the writings, the participants.

She added that she realised she was not alone with her difficulties:

I was so perfectionist and it was like a barrier in front of my writing and when I saw people who have the same barrier, I just thought I have to find a way to skip it.

She added:

I had some problems that even my supervisor didn't notice.

The learning community, she said, made her aware of the challenges of academic writing. She acknowledged:

It's probably in the future that I will have same problems.

Looking back on Maria's comments I tend to think that she was hoping for a structured programme that would systematically address and teach features of academic writing. Although she acknowledged she enjoyed the discussion and sharing, it seems that she did not see such discussion as a strong enough opportunity for learning. I am again made aware that for some participants the underlying concepts of a learning community needed to be more explicitly explained.

4k. The Seventh Session

Most of the discussion in this session centred on the writing which Vida shared. In the previous session, Vida had talked about her writing with uncertainty. She said her supervisor had rewritten her report on an experiment. She acknowledged his writing was better, but she said she did not know how to make her writing as good. She reported:

He only told me improve your writing but I don't know how.

The facilitators had suggested she could bring both her version and her supervisor's edited version to this session, so she brought copies of both to share.

This gave the group a chance to not only read and comment on a sample of writing but also to understand a supervisor's feedback. Since Vida came from sciences, it was also a good chance for me and other participants from Humanities to get a view of writing in other fields.

The topic of the report was in a field that neither the facilitators nor some of the participants, including me, were familiar with. As the content of the report was well outside the facilitators' scope of knowledge, they suggested we should limit our discussion to the writing itself. Professor Kate acknowledged:

What would you like us to consider in your writing? The actual details of the experiment stuff I do not necessarily understand.

Vida explained she had sent her writing to her supervisor who had edited it and sent her the revised form. The supervisor and Vida had not sat together to discuss the differences. Vida said:

I think my supervisor writes very beautiful but I can't. And I don't know how to improve my writing, because he always says improve your writing and I don't know how.

She added:

I write very simple, this is my problem I think. And my supervisor told me, I can understand you but it's not good, because of this he always changes my sentence.

When prompted to pick up on some of the differences between the two versions of the report, Vida offered that her supervisor was more academic:

His has fancy grammar. I always use very simple grammar.

At this point, the group read through the two versions and began to make comment on differences. I noted that Vida wrote briefly and did not give much explanation whereas her supervisor added more information and detail to the statements, thus making them clearer. Ahmad suggested that Vida's sentence structures were too simple and her supervisor made them more complex by putting them together using linking words and connectors. Ahmad explained:

He is trying to tie ideas together rather than putting one idea next to the other. He is just trying to use connectors like *since* and *then*. You see a comma here and then another idea.

Angy added that in places Vida was not direct enough and did not go straight to the point:

If you have a look at the procedure for example, what he is emphasising is the direct language that you need to use in a report so it is like a report. A report has a template and it has to be clear. It should be straightforward without so much wording.

Professor Kate added that it seemed that Vida's supervisor had tried to reduce the extra words to make the steps clearer, and also that he wanted to make her aware that she was jamming too much information into a phrase.

Professor Jess mentioned that she had noticed that many of her students who were second language speakers tended to overly repeat explanations. Being clearer and to the point allowed the reader to understand and therefore evaluate and critique better. The method suggested by Ahmad and Angy to overcome this issue was to use bullet points. Ahmad suggested the use of bullet points:

So bullet points is a very valid thing when it comes to reporting on things.

Angy agreed as did Professor Jess who reflected that bullet points could be useful to clearly list important specifics.

The facilitators then started to identify specific features that they noted Vida's supervisor had addressed in his changes. One feature was the use of technical terminology. Professor Jess pointed out a particular passage where the supervisor had replaced Vida's terminology:

When I read that sentence, I read a supervisor saying: please consider *capture* and *release* as significant factors here. He wants you to start learning to use that terminology.

This led to some discussion about the differences in terminology in the two reports.

Another feature identified was the use of the past tense and passive voice to report the experiment. Vida had written in the future tense and in imperatives as if advising the reader on the way the experiment should be done, which was probably how she had read it in a textbook. Professor Jess explained:

But you have to just report what you did. Past tense. And then he uses a passive when he talks about what was done to the materials.

She went through the supervisor's report and identified a few examples and then asked the group to find others.

A further outstanding feature was what was put into brackets. Both Vida's original and the supervisor's revision had items in brackets. But each had bracketed different parts of the overall statement. Professor Jess pointed out that what went in the main body of the sentence was the overarching statement and specific details were bracketed. In the supervisor's version, it was details like exact temperatures that were bracketed. It appeared that Vida had bracketed the key actions and had made the specific details the topic of her sentence.

After an extended discussion, Professor Jess suggested that Vida should not consider her supervisor's edits as criticisms but rather as teaching: he was showing her what she should focus on and how she should shape her report. She added:

I think he is giving you a beautiful model.

After discussing the two versions of the report, there was some further interchanges about the differences between the styles of writing in the Sciences and in the Humanities. Those in Humanities have been taught to use APA style, but both Vida's writing style and her supervisor's seemed different. Ahmad and Angy, who were also from Humanities, felt the same. An example we noted was in starting a sentence with Arabic numerals. During the discussion that followed, I realised that students in science usually follow a style set by their supervisors that does not have a specific name. So for me and the other students, there was a lot of learning of how science students write and the problems they face.

Unfortunately, Vida did not turn up for the next session which was the extended workshop and she did not return thereafter. I had noted the way Vida had listened closely throughout the discussion of her work and the way she had taken notes. She agreed to a follow-up interview when the project finished and I asked if she had gained anything from participating and why

she had not returned after that session. She said she had already got what she thought she could out of participating in the group. She said she had found the discussion of her report useful:

 Their feedback really helped me to improve my writing.

She also said she was now struggling with the pressures of time, and that she did not think her other writing problems could be addressed within the project:

 But one of my problems is that I think my grammar is not good enough and I cannot improve it in your class.

It is noteworthy that at the time of this session, my College was in process of being relocated to another campus and the old building where I was still using a meeting room was looking increasingly inhospitable. I wondered if that was demotivating for the participants who were based on the other campus.

Looking back on the session, I reflect that the facilitators, although they did not understand the topic, were able to offer sound advice about the structure of the writing whereas Vida had not initially been able to see the structural differences between the two versions. This points to a need for international students to learn and master general academic conventions, as well as the grammar and vocabulary of the language. The final chapter discusses provisions that could be made to ensure such teaching happens.

4l. The other participants

A number of the participants attended for only one or two sessions. Their very limited attendance meant they had little opportunity to either contribute to or learning from others in the group. However, the questions each did bring up are interesting further indicators of the concerns international doctoral students have about their writing. Their reasons for not continuing with the group bring forward a number of issues that I realise I need to consider further in any future work with setting up a learning community. Their stories are drawn together in this section.

Introducing these participants

Diba is an Iranian PhD student who studied the use of ICT by teachers. Diba had gone back to Iran while carrying out revisions required by her examiners and joined the group online.

Sima is a Bangladeshi nearing the end of her doctoral study about how migrant parents transmit their culture.

Nima is an Iranian student who is studying Chemical Engineering. He was introduced to the study through Maria and identified two reasons for joining: a struggle with writing in a second language and a desire to support my research.

Jane is a Chinese student nearing her confirmation who only attended the second session. She reported she joined because she expected it to be helpful to her writing development.

Flora is an Iranian Engineering student. She got to know about the study through Maria, and decided to join to help a compatriot.

Ehsan is an Iranian Ph.D. graduate currently enrolled in a bachelor degree in English literature. He heard about my study from a friend and approached me, asking to join.

Amin is an Iranian doctoral student in Engineering nearing the end of his study. He was notified by Maria of the study and attended the first session of the learning community, as he wanted to help a compatriot.

Lenzy is the only participant who was a native speaker of English from the United States. She had only just passed her confirmation and was at the stage of analysing her data, working on her first draft.

Issues they raised

Blocks, hesitations and procrastination

Amin and Diba, like several others in the group, talked about their difficulty in getting started in their writing. Amin shared his overall frustration:

Last week I locked myself in a room. It was a kind of writer block. I could not get down to writing.

Diba had more specific needs and talked about her lack of flexibility in starting a sentence: she explained she had to know exactly what her sentence was before she could move to a further stage. She reported:

Some of my colleagues were telling me to just start from somewhere, it doesn't matter. But, that was too difficult. Forgetting about that first sentence, trying other sentences and then coming back to that first sentence, was very hard for me to change.

The feeling of being stuck and not able to start writing was one that many of the participants discussed. Moreover, both facilitators acknowledged they also had periods when they just could not get started. It was, however, widely argued in the group discussions that the feeling of 'being stuck' was made more intense by insecurity about features of language and academic writing.

Searching for the right words

Diba reported her insecurity about finding the right words and verb structures. She said:

In writing, I was not sure of the words and the terminology that I was using, the tenses that I was using.

She added:

I would just realise that I wrote something in the first chapter that doesn't match with the second one.

She reflected that she assumed the reason for inconsistency in her writing was due to what she had been taught in Iran:

We were taught that you have to write sophisticated, you shouldn't use that much simple words, it should be a really complex language, and it shouldn't be repetitive.

So, the way we were taught was that we had to use synonyms instead of one word, which made it harder for the reader to understand and kind of influenced the consistency of the writing.

She acknowledged that she later realised that this was not the right way, and it might be better if one word was used throughout the thesis to stop confusion.

Flora shared her own struggles with paraphrasing. She said:

Sometimes I'm not sure that these words that I use are the correct words.

Her problem started a discussion in the group. Ahmad suggested ways to use dictionaries. His first suggestion was to use a monolingual dictionary. He said:

You can also use Cambridge dictionaries online and they also sometimes give synonyms and collocations of the same word. If there is one word that I need to learn now, I can go to the Oxford or the Cambridge dictionary and see the meaning of the word and see how it is used in two or three examples. Sometimes this is just enough.

Drawing on his own experience, he suggested another type of dictionary:

The way that I help myself out of this was using a collocation dictionary. It's not just clicking right on synonyms and using the list of words which is five or ten words. Whatever word you decide on you need to educate yourself, or at least enlarge your background about this word. How it is used in a sentence, what other words come with this word and what other word does it come with it?

Ahmad also advised her on where she could find such a dictionary. He explained:

There is a very handy collocation dictionary and it's free and online called Oxford Collocation Dictionary. It's always available and you can always go and look at it.

There is also something called Corpus Linguistics, you go online there is a corpora, contemporary English language (American English language corpora), and you type one word and you get hundreds of examples how this word is used and you can even decide if this is from research or from media or from articles.

Angy shared her experience of using an online platform. She explained:

There is a website that I use, which helps with the use of a word in context, in real English and then you see if that really means what you are trying to say, not just the word but the word in context.

She continued with introducing two computer sources:

I don't know if you have tried but it works sometimes for me, Grammarly, because Grammarly gives you the options, and then you say it's this or this or this? And then you realise there is another option, perhaps this one sounds better than this one and that's one. I don't know if you have used Prowriting as well? Prowriting is a new app and it's apparently comes much better than Grammarly because it goes not only through the commas, but it goes through the whole sentence in terms of cohesion and coherence and it's really interesting.

To better address lack of vocabulary, Professor Jess suggested taking a step back. She said:

Start identifying the range of words you are going to need most for the next part of your work. You pick a set of themes. It is a bit like learning the language all over again, but it is worth doing. That you identify the core vocabulary range you need for one area of your work.

Repetition

Closely related was a problem that Nima raised, that of repetition:

When I write a sentence, I come up always with similar sentences. When you read it, it looks very boring and I don't know what to do about it.

Thinking about the reason for the repetition, Nima reflected:

I don't have huge amount of vocabularies, so I keep using same vocabularies again and again.

Angy thought that he could use tools on the internet to help him, suggesting:

I think an academic phrasal bank would also help you and for that, there are lots of resources on the internet and that is something that helps you avoid repetition.

Professor Kate reflected that repetition could make writing look like a list. To deal with this, she suggested:

We can look at rewording some of the sentences so that the appearance of a list disappears. Often we do that by having linking words between the sentences. So it might be *similarly somebody finds this* or *in contrast a study done five years later showed.....*

Amin recounted that his supervisor said he was inconsistent in his use of terms. He acknowledged that in order to sound academic and avoid repetition he had tried to use synonyms of the same words. However, his supervisor reminded him those specific words could not be changed. He reported that his supervisor had told him:

Oh, look this is a specific term for this part. Write as simple, clear, and basic as possible.

Amin reflected that consistency was important:

Especially for Engineering, it should be super clear and concise because we are dealing with data.

Misleading readers

In the session he attended, Ehsan talked about his difficulty in getting his message across:

My audience gives me a different feedback to what I am expecting when we talk about the text. There I realise that I have written something different or I have written in the way that it is misunderstanding, it is not what I really had in mind.

He gave an example:

I have written a comparison about two movies. I was thinking about a particular scene and I was telling in that paper that a main character is getting distressed because he thinks that the problem was somewhere else. But the audience thought that I am talking about myself, the reference of the sentences was missed or lost in the text and was unknown I think.

Reflecting on the reason, he said:

All the time I have this confusion in my text because maybe I use too long sentences.

Signposting

Flora had shared a piece of her writing which was an introduction for her proposal. Reflecting on it, Professor Jess pointed out that her introduction lacked an introduction. She said:

I would quite like to know what I am going to read about here, and I would like a couple of sentences at the beginning that help me read this. I want something here that will tell me what the facts are going to be about and why you are telling me. So, something like: *In this section I will explain the problem of ...*

Ahmad followed on:

Like here, you have eight paragraphs. In every paragraph, there is one idea. Can you take the eight and put them in a few sentences and put those sentences on top?

Angy shared her writing with Flora to show her how she could also use signposting in her writing. She suggested:

So in the following, in this section you will find, in this part of my thesis or whatever you are writing, the following topics will be addressed, or you will find..., or you will get familiarized with..., that is a signpost, it's a road map that you present into the reader because the reader doesn't know what is going to be in the content.

In another session when Nima shared his writing, Professor Jess noticed that Nima started his chapters by stating his first point. She suggested:

I would like a sentence at the beginning telling me what this is going to be about. What the project is going to be.

She suggested writing an introductory sentence as clarifying the writing would help the reader make connections between the concepts discussed.

Use of passive voice

Several of these participants raised issues about the use of a passive voice. Jane talked about her preference for the passive and related it to what she had been taught in China:

So I think in my writing I prefer to use *in this study something will be studied or something will be learnt*, so I think it looks more academic. In China when we talked about English academic writing we always write more passive sentences.

Lenzy acknowledged some confusion about the voice of verbs. She asked:

If we need to use passive voice but still using active verbs, I struggle with that. So to clarify it is being able to reword a sentence. It is not necessarily I will do something but it is more active and possibly the third person. Isn't will more passive?

Professor Jess first explained the difference between passive and active:

Let's be clear what passive is. *I have killed a man*, active. *The man was killed by me*, passive. It has nothing to do with being future past or present. Passive is when it has been done to someone. So, *this research will explore dental hygiene*, active. *Dental hygiene will be explored by this thesis*. That's passive.

A discussion followed with participants offering examples of how different voices could be used.

Use of commas

Nima reported uncertainty with the use of commas:

I have a problem in putting commas in my writing. I use my intuition and I just read the paragraph and I think that somewhere I should use comma, but I'm not always sure about that.

The facilitators read his writing line by line and gave him feedback. Professor Jess first suggested:

When you are writing a new sentence use a full stop.

Then she considered his doubt about whether he needed a comma before the final item in a list:

You are worried about whether you should put a comma after *heat transfer* and before the *and* that follows? I think that is optional. Some people would say no before the *and*. I rather like it, because it makes it very clear what the grouping is.

In the session that Sima attended it was noted that she tends to place a comma directly after any occurrence of the word *that*. It was a habit she had developed in her previous study in Bangladesh.

Referencing

Nima explained his confusion about referencing a reported study. He explained:

For example, when I'm reading a paper and the paper references to another paper, should I mention the current paper or just the original one?

Ahmad emphasised the importance of reading the original work and reflected:

According to APA referencing, you can cite someone in someone else's work. However, it is much better if you try to find the original work of this person and then read it and then reference it rather than cite it from somebody else's work.

Professor Jess emphasised that if the work is about the foundation of your study, reading the original text is necessary. She affirmed:

You simply cite where you found them. To be a good student you go to the original source because you need to get the right words and feeling.

Translating

A part of Sima's data collection involved interviewing parents. These interviews were taken in Bangla and she had to translate them into English for her study. However, during the process of translation, she faced difficulties. She explained:

When I was using their words, or when I was trying to make sense of their words, many of the times I felt troubled. Like when I was interviewing one of my Bangladeshi parents, a lady, she used a Bangla phrase which when translated to English is "something in Bangla". It means we have so much cultural activity in every month; we have at least thirteen cultural activities in 12 months. So, these things happened to me when they used their phrases and translated it in English, those are not actual English. When I wrote them, they became contradictory in many of the places.

In response, Professor Jess reminded her of the purposes of transcription:

The reader has to understand it, otherwise there's a limited number of uses for things the reader can't understand.

There is a difference between what your participants say and what you say when you talk about them because you are the academic student who is not allowed to be confused, they can be.

Reflecting on Professor Jess's point, Sima asked:

Is accuracy the most important? This is for every writer, is accuracy the most important?

Professor Jess emphasised the intention of the study.

If it has a linguistic approach, transcription should be word by word and if the meaning is important, interpretation can be made where necessary.

You have to explain in your methodology, what you have done and why. You can do almost anything if you explain why your reason is a good one.

Professor Jess added:

If your purpose is to report a narrative and you confront the reader with bad grammar in the transcription then the reader starts focusing on the bad grammar rather than on what they are saying. It's about finding that balance of the flavour of the language; you don't want to correct everything and make them sound like they have just come out of Oxford, which is also a dialect, remember that. You want them to sound like themselves but you want them to be fully intelligible. You don't want people to wonder what this abstract concept is, because it is pointless.

Sima explained her approach in the study by saying:

I'm taking their ideas obviously but in one section I'm also putting the language too.

When I wrote my monologues, I have edited what they said in many places. As what they said was not exactly grammatically meaningful.

As detailed below, the participants reported in this chapter did not return to the group beyond one or two sessions. They raised issues without being able to follow them up. However, as I have previously noted, the issues they raised are relevant because they highlight the range of challenges international students face in writing. Many are about a restricted range of vocabulary. Some are about relatively surface details, such as the positioning of commas or how to cite a secondary source. Some are caused by confusion about what grammatically terms mean. Some concern skills such as creating flow in a paragraph or effective paraphrasing. Some are about complex academic and ethical concepts, such as the responsibilities of translation. The range highlights both the extent of areas in which international students need guidance and support and the challenge for supervisors in mentoring their students in their writing. These challenges are further discussed in Chapter Five.

What they liked about the group

I was able to interview Nima and Diba at the end of the project. They talked about various things they liked.

Before joining the group, Nima had sought feedback from others but had not been successful. He reported:

All my colleagues and my friends are busy with their own writing so I just write and read by myself.

I mostly learned from other participants in the group. You have a problem in your writing and you don't even realise it. But when someone raises the issue and talks about it, it makes you go back and you look at your writing and realise that you had the same problem in your writing.

Participating in the group enabled Nima to share his writing and to engage with others who shared their work. The sharing by others as well as direct feedback on his work made him more aware of a range of aspects of writing and helped him identify specific issues that were problematic, whereas previously he had simply thought about improving his writing in a general way.

Nima also reported that he found differences in the ways students from different fields of study view academic writing. He stated:

Writing in Engineering is much easier than Humanity fields because when you are working in a special field you have a specific amount of words you can use in your writing so it makes it easier so you don't struggle too much with your writing. It doesn't have to be very beautiful like literature or other things.

Diba talked about several things she had found useful. She revealed that she had always wanted to know more about writing journals, as she had not been taught how to. The facilitators shared their journals and Diba acknowledged that she found reading them thought provoking and it gave her a chance to learn. She reflected:

I used to write journals but not the way that Professor Kate was approaching it so it was very interesting input for me - how to be free when you are writing a journal.

She reported that she actively tried to listen and learn from sharing with those in the same field. She acknowledged:

I learnt a lot from, for instance, Mona's and Angy's, because they were more into Education than the other ones. I knew that field better, the content and the context, the style, the approach, the methodology and all of that, so that made a huge difference.

She added:

You are more confident when you have similar content and you have similar context.

Diba reported that participating in the group provided a chance for her to learn more not only about academic writing, but also about the concept of a learning community. She said:

In terms of some of the rules and instructions that the facilitators gave and pulling all the things together I learned from the facilitators. In terms of psychology and self-efficacy, self-identity, self-confidence and all of that, I learned from the participants.

She acknowledged that discussions led her to be more self-reflective:

I think talking about the things gives you a self-reflection before and after it, specifically after it. It's after talking that you can understand what your problem is or what is it that you are thinking about. So saying it to people made it more clear to yourself.

She added that learning was not limited to the discussions:

Reading somebody else's working gives you a better understanding of what are the important things and at the same time realising what are the necessary aspects in writing and what are not.

She said that the fact that all the participants were second language speakers made Diba feel comfortable sharing her ideas:

Because none of us were native speakers in the group, so that also made it a bit easier. So at least for me it felt all of us were similar in some way or another.

Diba shared that being in the group made her realise that a major difficulty in the PhD journey is the loneliness of the process where you think you are the only one with writing difficulties. Reflecting on the learning community, she said:

When you are with others and they are sharing their problems you realise that you are not alone and this gives you a sense of confidence, at the same time you will see how others are coping with that and you can learn from that.

She added:

It is just a normal process in every Ph.D. and I think this is one of the major benefits of this group, we could get together and talk about our problems and improve ourselves, and at the same time improve our self-confidence.

Diba reported that during her studies she had taken various academic writing courses; however, she had not succeeded in finding the answers she was looking for. She said:

So, when I was told there is this programme going to happen, I thought that it is a good opportunity to be with others and see how they are coping with their writing problems.

She added that groups she had previously joined would usually fall apart, but this learning community did not. Explaining her view on why she thought this learning community remained, she said:

It had a very powerful purpose for you as a researcher and you tried to gather everybody and push everybody, just keep emailing, messaging try to provide everything possible to make the thing going.

Criticisms and reservations

Both Nima and Diba also had some suggestions for what could be improved.

Nima explained that he would prefer more structured sessions in order to avoid repetition:

Without structure, the same problems continue to rise and I think these structures are good in meetings to emphasise specific issues in each session and to learn, which I think is better this way.

Nima argued that selection of specific topics for discussion would better address the needs of students. He stated that he would prefer that at the beginning of each session the facilitators would teach a writing point and then continue with discussions. He stated:

Like the academic skill courses, it would be useful for the participants to have 10-minute teaching session.

Diba also thought the structure could be improvised. She said:

Maybe it should be on a particular writing point that students have a problem with and then focus on it.

It was better at the end of each session to have a summary of what we have done, on what we have achieved, on what we are to achieve, what we can follow up from today for the next session. I think we didn't have that pulling together and that's why it looked so scattered.

What Nima and Diba liked and what they critiqued resonates with what others in the group said. The opportunity of learning from peers and the question of stronger structure are matters I will return to in Chapter Five.

Reasons for leaving

Some of the participants shared their reasons for leaving at the time they dropped out. Others talked about them in an interview after the project finished. A couple did not answer my emails.

During the second session, Lenzy realised that all the other student participants were second language speakers of English. She emailed me saying:

Given that English is my native language this group seems to have issues different to mine and I think my participation will not be as useful to the group since I have not had the same challenges.

Amin stopped coming and notified me saying:

I glad your project is going well and you have enough participants as I've heard from Maria. I am not participating anymore as I am focusing in my project.

Jane cited a lack of time:

Unfortunately, I didn't have enough time to participate in all sessions.

Ehsan noted the same problem:

I was intending to further participate, but was not able to due to lack of time.

Nima' explained his irregular attendance and final dropping out in terms of time pressure and tiredness:

I was in a position that I was struggling with my methodology, with my proposal so I was really busy and tired. Sometimes my work extended to 7 or 8 pm and I got tired and I wanted to rest.

Sima is not only a student, but she also a wife and a mother of a young boy. Therefore, it was hard for her to join the learning community in person. After the session, she sent a letter and reflected on her experience of the session:

I have identified some of the faults I was always doing in my writing, those I did not understand before that, those needed correction. I think, these sessions are very supportive particularly for the international students for whom English is more like a foreign language, like me.

She lives in Christchurch but joined the group through Zoom. She explained:

The scheduled time was not suitable for me to attend. Video conferencing was distracting for the meeting as I had disconnection several times, and my son was continuously trying to have a peek.

I and the other participants in the room also noticed that her microphone was not working well and was noisy at times so that I had to mute her.

Diba's participation within the study was limited to three virtual sessions. To participate she had to get up early in the morning due to the time difference between Christchurch, New Zealand, and Kashan, Iran. When the sessions started at 5:30 pm, it was 7:30 am in Iran.

As well as having a slow internet connection, Diba had to deal with the hassle of using internet proxy, which meant an even slower connection. Sometimes she could not connect at all. In her case, external circumstances got in the way:

I didn't stop trying to come. It was the facilities. I wasn't able to join. Sometimes I was traveling from one place to another place so that was an issue.

Although timing and poor connection made it difficult for Diba to join in, she followed the work of the group by watching recordings. She reported:

I was actively listening to all of the videos that were recorded and I really used and enjoyed them, and it was very useful for me.

As I reflect on the reasons for leaving, I note that lack of time was repeatedly cited. Given the pressures of doctoral study, I am sure that time was an important factor. However, I also wonder if they would have made time if they had found that the discussions in the group were meeting their perceived needs. The freedom to come, try out and perhaps leave is an important element in the evolution of a collaborative community, and it was also one of the assurances I gave potential participants when I asked them to sign consent forms. So, it is perhaps predictable that a proportion of the participants would drop out. Nevertheless, looking back with the awareness I have gained through conducting this project, I think about ways I could have presented the project more clearly and ways I could have created a greater sense of belonging in the early sessions. I return to these considerations in the final chapter.

4m. The Eighth session

A face-to-face workshop and a small group

The eighth session of the study was different from all the rest of the sessions as it was a workshop where both facilitators were physically present. It had been planned and repeatedly notified a month or two earlier and it was expected to last several hours and be followed by a potluck dinner. Many of the participants had indicated they would attend.

Before the session began the facilitators and I prepared some questions to start the session. The questions invited feedback on what the participants had considered useful in the preceding sessions, what they would like to change, and recommendations for future projects. In the plan, participants would discuss the questions in pairs and then would share their ideas with the rest of the group.

In spite of all the reminders, only Ahmad and Farzaneh turned up for the session. Diba from Iran tried to join online, but her connection was constantly broken. For me the low level of attendance was really disappointing and embarrassing as both facilitators had travelled a long distance. (Later, several students gave apologies explaining unexpected classes and one explained he could not get into the building my College had just been shifted into because he did not have the right pass on his student card.)

The facilitators gave the questions to the participants and chose to leave the room so that the participants could discuss all issues that they felt needed discussing without being concerned about what the facilitators might think. Before leaving, they asked me to stay in my role as a participant rather than as a researcher. I found that our discussion flowed freely and thoughtfully. This was perhaps an effect of having only a small group consisting of people who had been actively engaged in the project. After an interval, the facilitators returned and our responses to the questions opened out to more discussion.

Gains from participating in the community

Each of us acknowledged a range of insights we had gained from participating. For example, Ahmad acknowledged that through the discussions he had gained a better understanding of his research methodology and felt able to strengthen his research design:

I remember one of the sessions changed my way of looking at qualitative research. When I saw other students' confusion about their methodology, in a way or another that clarified a lot of my questions about my own methodology. As they started raising questions and I started figuring out answers for their questions helped me to figure out answers for myself.

Being in the learning community and hearing and seeing how other students struggled with their methodologies made Ahmad realise that he was not the only one. It seemed that engaging in other participants' worries about their design and theoretical concepts allowed Ahmad to also process his own concerns. Like me, Ahmad had a quantitative background and was a novice qualitative researcher. He acknowledged in this workshop how he had struggled to accept and comprehend aspects of qualitative research. He said that listening to the discussions about other participants' problems had allowed him to push through blocks and to surrender ideas that no longer seemed relevant.

Farzaneh affirmed that the session in which she brought in part of her writing and got feedback made a significant difference. She reflected that listening to those comments and making consequent changes made her writing look clearer and helped her with her confirmation proposal. She said:

There were too many numbers, dates, in my writing and I did change it and I think it made things look nicer. That was one thing that directly affected my proposal.

She further stated that sessions where others brought in their writing, like the one with Vida, were significant as well for her:

It's more concrete and tangible because you see the person sitting in front of you and then the writing of that person.

Both Ahmad and Farzaneh maintained that their main problem was not in terms of grammar and vocabulary, rather their main issue was in terms of structure and organisation of ideas. Farzaneh explained:

Maybe for me the problem was not the level of sentence of grammar or these things but for me, as you [Ahmad] said, it was the structure of the whole thing.

I also stated that I came to realise that not only I was not alone in facing writing difficulty, but I shared more than I had presumed with other students. I explained:

Before the learning community, I myself thought that I was the only one who had writing difficulties. Being able to listen to others made me realise that everyone had writing difficulties. Also, my assumption was that international students would mostly have surface errors, but just like me they had deeper errors.

In the snatch of the online connection, Diba repeated that it was good to talk to others about her research and not to be alone.

Views about usefulness

Both Farzaneh and Ahmad affirmed that they had enjoyed the learning community but noted that attendance was hard for them. Farzaneh said her attendance depended on her availability as she worked part-time. Ahmad said that being at the end of his studies made his attendance more difficult as he was struggling with time. Therefore, he suggested that having the sessions at the beginning of students' studies. They both viewed the learning community as useful as it differed from the support sessions that the university provided. Farzaneh reflected:

There are some support sessions but something like this is interactive but in those sessions they just come and talk and explain and it's not as useful as this.

Ahmad added that in the support sessions, the student takes his or her own problems and receives feedback, but the learning community provided the chance to hear other people's issues as well:

When you go to these sessions you go with your own questions but when you go to such a learning community you listen to other peoples issues and sometimes their questions brings some new ways of looking at your own work.

Ideas about the nature of a learning community

Defining what a learning community is and how people learn within a learning community was another topic that was raised. In Farzaneh and Ahmad's view, a learning community meant a group of people that learned together. Farzaneh said:

They learn something together.

Ahmad considered the talks that took place while having a meal or tea as learning communities because learning takes place in them. Professor Jess defined learning community as a community of practice in which learning takes place. It has to have a sense of goal, commitment or collaboration, she said:

It has to have learning and the learning has to have some kind of sense of goal or commitment or collaboration that is more deliberative than the slightly more accidental.

In Ahmad's view, learning could take place unconsciously anywhere and was not limited to a place, and the learning that takes place would not be limited to the topic. He reflected:

You might think that you are not learning as a teacher while you are teaching but you learn unconsciously.

He added:

I think it is a multi-layer thing, it's not just one straight forward process. We say we come here to learn about sentence structure today, but when we leave, we leave with different understandings.

Professor Jess agreed that various kinds of learning could happen while focusing on one topic and it would not be limited to the topic itself. Professor Kate added that whatever is learnt has to be needed and used, therefore purpose is necessary. Professor Jess further added that learning has no limits to what is learnt, how it is learnt, and its purposes. Professor Jess reflected:

It's relational, it's multimodal, it's goal oriented. It's got so many different levels. It's conscious and it's unconscious.

Examining silences

An issue that was raised by Professor Jess was that many participants mentioned they had difficulties in regards to their writing, but they did not share what these were in particular. She wondered if it was self-protectiveness and fear of losing face by revealing a weakness. Ahmad suggested that people in general do not like to share their flaws as they may find their face being threatened and would rather learn individually in order to save their face:

People don't want to lose their face by saying I don't know how to do that. Maybe they go on a self-study journey rather than talk with other people about it.

Suggestions for the future

In Ahmad's view, the learning community would have had a better outcome if participants had been categorised into same research groups, methodologies, and stages of studies. Ahmad suggested:

Maybe we divide them into groups of three or two based on their stage and real needs and what they exactly want.

However, he did acknowledge that there might be the risk of turning the learning community into a class group:

Do you accept this as a learning community or as a learning group?

And Ahmed also acknowledged that the new insights he had gained about qualitative research came because of issues raised by students at an earlier part of their study and giving them feedback. Early on in their study, he suggested that students would have more time and could become more aware of writing issues ahead, and could use those learnings at the end when they have a shortage of time:

If these sessions can happen at the beginning of a student's joining the university, like in the first two months possibly, I think at this time we were not at much stressed as we are now in my stage.

Farzaneh partially agreed:

So learning communities like this can be very useful especially for the ones who are at the start of their research journey.

However, she added:

It won't benefit them unless they are under pressure and they know how precious some comments are.

I agreed with Farzaneh, adding that learning communities at the initial stages of study would be more like lessons as students would not have written enough and have not found their problems to talk about and acknowledge feedback:

Because you have started writing, you would get to know your problems a lot more but at the beginning, you won't know your problems because you haven't met them much.

Ahmad then suggested that groups based on stages could be formed and then they can be mixed once every month to learn from one another.

Professor Kate then referred to a study by Gee (2003). According to Gee's study, having people with different proficiencies is useful as they talk, collaborate and learn from one another, and also the fact that people become conscious is an important element. She said:

Gee says that perhaps the best learning occurs when novices and experts are mixed together.

Professor Jess picked up the theme of becoming more conscious and reflected that having listened to the participants made her more aware and conscious about the problems that students face in knowing their difficulty but not finding a tool to overcome it. She explained:

My big insight was what a block it is to an international student to know where they want to go but to not know which tools to pull on to do it.

Top down/bottom up learning

In discussion about the future of the learning community, Ahmad and Farzaneh proposed ways that the university could benefit from this study and create structured learning groups to help future students. This started a debate on top-down and bottom-up processes of learning. In a top-down process, the university would impose what students have to learn whereas in a bottom-up process, the students would make decisions on what is important and needs to be learned. Professor Kate said:

In top-down learning, it's being told what you should learn but there is also the bottom up learning where you are the person making the decision about what's important to me.

Ahmad asserted his belief in a bottom-up learning and saw it as more effective. In his view, the university could do a study, find the struggles of students and establish learning communities. Ahmad explained:

The university sets it up. Facilitates it only. And then the learning and the aims and the outcome and even the evaluation of its outcome has to be done by the people themselves.

He continued:

The university decides the priorities for their learning and then the university forms groups of students based on this so it is always started by studying students' needs, talking to students, have communication with students about what do we need to learn. Then the university takes this to create the basic groups.

He added:

It would not need to be compulsory, if they feel like they own it since the beginning. This is what you really talked about two months ago, your learning issues, your learning problems, and based on this we had a group of experts who studies your needs and came up with this programme for you.

Professor Jess questioned:

Possibly the university still sees the PhD very much as an individual thing?

Discussion of the suggestion that the university should organise a range of learning communities led to discussion of the future of this particular one. Ahmad stated flatly that being in his last year of study and under stress and pressure he could no longer participate until he finished his study, adding:

But if we meet in a different situation or away from this stress and away from our work and all these things we could have continued meetings.

Farzaneh on the other hand was keen to continue the learning community and keep it alive as she found it beneficial and already established:

It works and I experienced it and I know that it works and I know that I needed it and I know there are a lot of people who need it so why not?

Professor Jess suggested that Farzaneh could herself take on the role of an organiser and continue the sessions, and both she and Professor Kate signalled their willingness to participate online if needed.

Reflecting on the session, I noticed that very little of the discussion focused on the mechanics of writing or on surface features of academic writing. Rather there was discussion about the

intentions of writing and about means of evolving and improving the expression of ideas, about the nature of learning and about ways the university could provide the kind of collaborative learning spaces that tat the participants had experienced in this group.

4n. Jess's Story

Introducing Jess

I understood that Professor Jess agreed to supervise my doctoral study and my project because she was interested in learning communities, in action research and in understanding how international students met with the challenges of doing doctoral research in a context that was different from their own in language and culture. She told me:

I'm not so interested in research that just identifies problems. That's probably needed too, but it's not where I want to put my energy and time. I'm interested in projects that look for ways to resolve some of the problems.

I saw that she had a large number of international students from various backgrounds and she told me that while a few were already capable writers in English, many of them had struggled with language in writing their theses:

I have had a couple of international students who wrote with flair and who seemed to have absolute confidence in using sophisticated terminology to describe abstract concepts, without it sounding like jargon. They blew me away. But most of my students had problems with writing. They could all speak English really well and they had gained high enough levels in IELTS to get entry into the PhD. And they could read journals and take notes. But when it came to writing – there were all sorts of different problems. Sometimes they had developed forms of English in their home countries that were different – using words that had totally different meanings for us or using sentence structures that seemed very awkward and hard to follow. Or maybe they would repeat themselves a lot or say things too vaguely or be too absolute about something without showing the evidence. All of them, all the international students I have supervised knew what they wanted to say – I could hear them argue their ideas out with each other and they could explain them to me if I pushed them far enough to get them to argue with me. We spent a lot of time navigating through language.

I learned from her that over the years she developed a practice of holding regular seminars with the whole group of her students. In some sessions she might introduce a topic, she said, like discussion of the importance of place or how to write a literature review. In others, one of the students present part of their work or a problem. She explained:

I learned early on that most of my students were wanting me to give them advice or even directly tell them what to do but they did not really like to talk to each other about their work or to share things. I think it was partly their earlier training – which was competitive and very ‘right answer’ driven. And because our universities now don’t really encourage doctoral students to collaborate with each other. They give presentations and conferences and all that but they mainly work on their own. I tried to break that down - to create a community among the doctoral students - socially and academically. I think you only get so far in your thinking when you work on your own. We all need to try out our ideas with other people. And it’s good too when other people say how they see things differently. It makes you think again. That’s why I initially kind of dragged all my students together to set up a group to talk and question and explore things. It’s only later that I began to read about communities of practice and that I began to develop my own ideas about learning communities.

By the time I finally gained admission to the university, Professor Jess was beginning to plan a staged retirement. However, I wanted to work with her anyway.

Dealing with changes

As explained in Chapter Two, my initial plan had been to research a learning community that Professor Jess led with her students, but that plan changed. After the study finished I asked Professor Jess to reflect about the changes in what was set up. She said:

Research can be like that. Sometimes what happens in the field makes you change. You can go with it or you can find something else to do. Yes, I had initially seen it evolving differently too. Some of it was the delays that came with you getting ethics and what you changed because of their concerns. And there were also personal issues in my life - family issues. I needed to start working from off-campus earlier than I had expected. It brought in different kinds of spin.

I asked her if she would be willing to comment on what happened with the ethics committee. She answered:

I think participatory action research is still a pretty new approach for most of the members of the committee. There’s a lot of writing now questioning objectivity and about how power plays out in different ways and how it’s mainly important to recognise that and make that part of the research. But that wasn’t the approach to research most of them

were used to. So I guess they found it challenging. If I'm going to be honest I have to say I found it challenging that their procedures would not allow a supervisor to explain some of the theoretical concepts because the student - like you - who is going for ethical approval is just beginning their doctoral learning. But the good thing was that it made you think about the role of facilitators and power and whether neutrality was possible. So the set up changed. It ended up with you having to set up your own group from scratch. That was perhaps a bit artificial, but it led to some interesting outcomes. And it led to Kate being brought into the project. That was a really good thing.

I asked her to talk further about Professor Kate's participation. She stated:

I like Kate's way of working. That makes it an easy collaboration for me. We've worked together before so I knew I was not going to be shocked by what she might do. I trust her as a facilitator. She's more patient than me and can stay quiet a lot longer. I could trust her to pull me up if I talked too much. And although I think it could have been really difficult for your project to bring in a complete outsider and especially one who lived in another country, Kate had been in our university and she had met many of my own students and we had even had an Aussie-New Zealand doctoral symposium some years ago. So it was a good thing that she was able to take on the role of lead facilitator. And having two of us there for most sessions kind of demystified any sense of academic authority - I think. Because we could give different points of view. I think it helped us be more part of the group rather than having one person who was the leader. And when we talked with you after each session in the debrief, it made our comments more spontaneous. Maybe we balanced each other out a bit. At any rate, having her there gave me the chance to sit back sometimes and listen and also it gave me someone to bounce off. Maybe it did that for her.

Looking back across my memories of our debriefs, as well as reading the transcribed words, I recall that neither of the professors had claimed authority or been defensive in discussing what had happened in the session. They did talk about what was interesting and had further potential in the questions and comments and hesitations and they pulled me into discussions of what we should bring to the next session to make it easier for the participants to share their thoughts. I reflect that perhaps having two people to talk to about what had happened and what we should do next made me less diffident about sharing what I thought than if it was just me talking to a

facilitator I thought knew more than me and was in charge. It was just a three-way open conversation.

Because I was aware that it had taken the student participants a couple of sessions to really start talking about their writing and that only a few people attended most of the sessions, I asked Professor Jess if the discussion in the learning community had gone the way she thought they would. She replied:

It was different. Having said that, I'm not sure there's any such thing as a normal or predictable learning community. They kind of evolve. If they didn't, it would just be a series of tutorials. Any new group takes a while to settle in and become comfortable with talking with each other. In a way this group was a bit artificial because you brought it together for your research project and needed it to keep running on the broad topic of academic writing. And the participants were willing to go along with your needs as well as hoping to get something out of it for themselves.

But I did expect that there might be more talk about grammar and about things like structuring paragraphs. And there was some. People talked about ways to avoid colloquialism and clichés, ways to find good synonyms, the use of past and present tenses and passive and active verbs. There was that kind of discussion. But not many people brought writing, though a couple did. So that brought in a bit of uncertainty. And as well as that because of the delays with getting ethics you ended up starting towards the end of the year and that coincided with the big shift of the College to the new building on the other campus and all that fuss with unfinished spaces and problems with access codes. But there is no normal. It's just a matter of trying to read where the group's at and encouraging them to speak out about what they need and think.

I asked her if she thought we should have organised it better and found ways make people speak out more. She replied:

You can always look and find ways to do it better. That's what reflection is for. In fact I think we tried to do that in our debriefs after each session. At the beginning they were a new group. Kate had never met many of them before and I only knew a few of them. And I think most of them did not know each other to begin with. So there was a bit of awkwardness at start - friendly but unsure of what to expect. The three of us has talked a lot about learning communities, but they had only read the few sentences in your

information sheet. They had to grow into a different way of processing their learning. Not relying on instruction or advice from above.

Professor Jess's comments aligned with what some of the participants had said but from a different perspective. They had talked about unsureness and had suggested it could be fixed by providing more structure. Professor Jess seemed to be seeing the unsureness as a natural part of an evolving process. From my own observation and the participants' reports, it is true that those who came to most of the sessions seemed to find their own ways of getting something useful from the process.

Because I was concerned that not many of the student participants had brought their writing to discuss, I raised the issue with Professor Jess. She acknowledged she had hoped more would bring writing to share:

When you set up the project, I did envisage people bringing in regular small sections of their work - maybe just a page or a bullet point outline. And we did repeatedly invite them to. But you can't force people to share. And some did share their writing. And in several cases that led to really good discussions. For example, Vida brought along a report she had written about an experiment and her supervisor's revised version. She told us she knew his was better but didn't know exactly why, so we went through it and showed her how he had described the experiment in the past tense as something that had been done whereas she had talked about it in a mix of imperative and future tense, the ways it might be described as instruction in a textbook. And some other features. There were others, like Ahmad who came to almost every session but didn't bring any writing. But he did talk about his writing. He seemed to prefer that approach. People have different ways of sharing.

Because it was my project I worried about whether we could have identified and met participants' needs better and if that would have encouraged them to stay. I asked Professor Jess for her thoughts. She responded:

We should always try to do it better. That doesn't mean that it will work out perfectly when you refine your approach. It's about group dynamics and lots of things influence them. In one early debrief we decided to develop a survey, didn't we? Asking what they would like to cover and asking for suggestions about what we could do differently. But we only got a couple of replies. And if I remember right they were mainly requests for advice about fairly specific aspects of writing like use of passive verbs and also about

developing a logical structure. We did get a discussion going about those. But your ethics approval had stipulated that participants could not be asked to make a commitment to keep coming and there were a lot of other demands on their time. And a lot of disruptions over the end-of-year break and shift to the main campus. Maybe some left because they were not getting enough out of it, but maybe they left because they had already got something they wanted and had other pressures to deal with. In a way I could compare it to a watering hole where people might come in when they needed something or had time to spare. Even in long lasting groups, people get different things out of it and bring different levels of active engagement.

I recall that, as well as the survey, there were several instances when one of the facilitators asked participants to nominate specific problems in their writing that they would like to give attention to. For example, Professor Jess suggested “To move us forward to the next session I’m going to ask everybody at the end of this meeting to write down three things they are going to fix forever”. I recall that several of the participants did come back with such specifics and note that some of the participants’ narratives highlight specific features of grammar or style that they have begun to pay attention to. As I think about Professor Jess’s comments here, I reflect that one of the main differences between a learning community and a tutorial group is that the direction of the community depends on input from its members. I think it was only in the later stages of this project that the student participants who remained began to shape the direction of discussions rather than waiting for invitations and prompts. Perhaps they were only just becoming a learning community at the time the project finished.

Working online

While it was always foreseen that Professor Kate would facilitate online, delays in the start and Professor Jess’s personal circumstances meant that she was also often online. She commented on the effect of participating remotely:

And what was different for me too was that Kate and I were working with the group online and I’ve never done that before. It took a bit of getting used to – harder to read expressions and reactions and to make sure everyone got a chance to talk. I felt it was hard in the first couple of sessions to push through the screen and try and get into the room. But that got better. And sometimes handling the technology was a bit of a problem, like we had difficulty at the start in putting writing up on the screen and still seeing people’s faces. That’s why we asked for emails in advance.

I did like the couple of meetings when we were actually in the room better. So I guess if I had a choice I would prefer to do it with us all physically present. However, it did show that distance does not have to stop you developing an interactive group. I found that experience very valuable when we had lockdown this year and I needed to bring my doctoral students together online as a way of dealing with the enforced isolation.

At the time I ran the project, it did seem that working online was a fall-back strategy. However, I am finishing my writing of this thesis in a period when New Zealand has just come out of intense lockdown with almost all communication being carried out online, and when countries around the world have been forced to reconsider education as something that takes place online, at least for a period. I've heard from colleagues in various countries that they have been nervous about trying to teach online instead of face-to-face and I am glad I have had the experience through this project. The medium did create some awkwardness at first and some fumbling with resources, but it became more relaxed as we continued. The remoteness became manageable.

Working with samples of writing

Although not everyone brought writing to the group, several participants did. I invited Professor Jess to comment on the way discussions arose about the samples. She talked about one session that had made a strong impression on her.

The piece of writing that Vida brought in. She had rewritten up an experiment and then her supervisor completely re-wrote it to serve as a model. She brought both in. She told us she could see his was better but she said she didn't know what to do to make her writing like his. Her subject was Chemistry Engineering and I know nothing about that. Nor did Kate. But when I looked at it I could see the structural elements that made his read like a report and hers sound like the reiteration of a textbook instruction. We were able to go through the verb forms with her and I think she hadn't really noticed that difference before. Perhaps before that occasion she had been reporting her understanding of what the experiment was about, but she had not reported it like something she had in fact carried out. I think that was a bit of a breakthrough for her – and perhaps also for some others because we then opened it up to a chat about writing the methodology chapter in a way that reported what had actually happened.

In addition, there was big difference in what was bracketed in the two reports. Both of them used brackets but put different elements of the information in them. I don't know enough about the subject to really understand why the supervisor had placed the items in brackets as he did. But I could draw Vida's attention to the difference and ask her to help us figure it out. And she did. She explained, at first hesitantly and uncertainly and then with slowly increasing confidence, why some things were significant to report and others were more in the nature of background explanation.

I think the big thing it did for Vida was that it helped her understand what her supervisor had offered her as a model. Before that she had just seemed to be intimidated by the extent of the correction and had seen it as criticism. I think it might have given her confidence to talk to him more and to use his advice. Throughout the project both Kate and I talked about the fact that the supervisor was the best advisor for content and for the style appropriate to the discipline. We were just sounding boards. Maybe talking to the group became a kind of practice for her getting more comfortable about talking to her supervisor.

For me, the big thing was that I learned that it was possible for a group that came from different disciplines to discuss and give useful advice on even quite specialised writing.

The structure of groups

I found Professor Jess's comments in contrast to the comments made by several of the student participants, who suggested that it would be better if a group was made up from students in the same discipline. I asked Professor Jess whether her comment meant she disagreed.

No, I don't necessarily disagree. My own experience has been with students who were all in Education. And that did create a kind of common ground.

But even then some of them probably thought at the beginning that only those studying almost the same topic could offer useful comments on their work. But they found that even the questions that showed lack of understanding were useful, because it pushed them to think about ways of answering that were actively trying to communicate meaning, rather than falling back on the predictable phrases they sometimes used in their writing.

It depends on what's possible. I think talking about your work with others who are doing the same general kind of work – in this case doctoral research - is really useful. Talk

forces you to own ideas in ways that writing doesn't always do. And talk allows pretty immediate feedback. Questions, even expressions on people's faces, come while the ideas are still warm in your head, whereas by the time we supervisors give feedback on writing, the student's focus has often gone on to something new. So I think the opportunity to talk about your work is the big thing. The grouping is situational. Because learning communities are often informal there's usually something that pulls them together - it may be a person catalyst, like a supervisor, or a research hub. In this case, it was your project.

When Professor Jess talked about the informal nature of learning communities, it prompted me to ask for her reactions to some participants' suggestions that the university should set them up. She said:

I wonder if what they are really saying is that it should become more common practice for supervisors or postgraduate centres to set them up. Universities set up study centres and student support centres. I tend to think that a structure that was formally set up would be more like a tutorial group. And I don't want to devalue those or study centres. Learning can, of course, happen in all of them. I guess I tend to use the term *learning community* to describe a group that evolves organically and learns through an evolving commitment by its members to share, discuss and critique.

"So was what I set up really a learning community?" I asked. I was very aware that many of the participants had joined because they wanted to support my research without much idea of what to expect would happen in the group. Professor Jess thought for a long moment before she answered:

In the beginning it was just a group. One that, as you say, came together partly to support you. But that is the same with any group I've set up that I hoped would evolve into a learning community. My groups probably came together initially out of respect for me because I was their supervisor. They may also have wanted to learn about methodology or lit reviews or whatever I tabled as the topic for our first sessions. But the capacity of the people in the group to be collaborative and learn with and from each other is something that had to evolve. I conceptualised it as a learning community because that's what I wanted to happen.

I don't think you can find an easy cut-off point when you can say this is still just a group or this has now become a real learning community. I think you can say things like this is

the kind of sharing that happens in the group, or this is the way power operates, or these are some of the questions and provocations that have come up, or these are some of the new concepts or understandings that individual students have developed that seem to have come from discussions within the group.

So I'd say you set up a group with the hope it would become a learning community. And that you and Kate and I worked with the group in a way that we hoped would facilitate their confidence to share their thoughts as well as their problems. And I'd also say that yes, various kinds of learning did evolve through the interactions in the group. It's not a matter of a tight definition.

To some extent, I still struggle with Professor Jess's answer. I like clear definitions. However, I take her point that a learning community is not formed by just calling people together: it is an evolving process. As I reflect on the operation of the group in the terms she had described, I acknowledge that there was a shift from people coming together to support me to people actively engaging with each other and with their particular concerns about academic writing. Perhaps some of that shift occurred because some people left and those who remained were more willing to share and argue. Facilitation played a significant role in that shift and I discuss that in further detail in Chapter Five.

Surprises and discoveries

Being very aware of my own initial expectations of what would happen in the group and the ways what actually happened was different, I asked Professor Jess if there had been any developments in the learning community that surprised her. She smiled and nodded vigorously. She said:

Definitely! I did think that participants would want to talk more about the surface aspects of writing, like sentence construction. Because that's where I as a supervisor saw problems in my students' writing. And also developing a logical progress in a paragraph and in a chapter. And we did get some of that. But for a while I felt we were not getting enough focus on that. And then I became aware that something else was happening.

I realised that participants were talking about academic writing in terms of developing, refining and expressing their ideas. In fact, much the same way I would talk about working on my writing. It became very overt in the extended workshop session when people talked about how they enjoyed being able to talk regularly with two established

academics about what they wanted to write and the difficulties they had in expressing themselves effectively. It was clearly important to them that they were taken seriously as people who not only struggled with expressing ideas but also had ideas. Then I looked back to the very first sessions when participants talked about writers' block and Angy talked about being too emotional in her writing and Farzaneh's account of being critiqued for being too simple in her style. They were approaching academic writing in terms of their overall ability to engage in academic discourse. Yes, they did recognise that there were grammar issues and vocab issues and problems with being vague or too sweeping.

So that made me think about what we give and what we need to give our international students. I wonder if we give them enough opportunity to talk about their research and about what they read? I don't mean just in seminars, although those are useful. I'm thinking more about chat spaces. Among themselves and with the academics in their department. Do we see them as people with interesting ideas or just as people who need help? And that makes me think – or rather it adds to my on-going thinking about what it means to teach postgraduate students.

I'm not saying I think it's not important to support international students in improving the surface features of their writing, because they need that to have their thesis accepted and for getting future publications. It's rather we need to actively reinforce them as writers of ideas as well.

So yes, I did get seriously challenged in my pre-suppositions. And I'm glad it's provoked me.

In a way Professor Jess's comments surprised me. I had not considered that the facilitators might be there as learners. I had unconsciously seen them as fully developed academics and seen their role in the group as guides rather than learners. Her comments led me back to the discussion by Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) about the role of the facilitator. They present "the people involved in collaborative participatory action research projects ... as an open and inclusive network in which the facilitator can be a contributing co-participant" (p. 594). Learning, I acknowledge, is an aspect of participation as much as is guiding.

Disappointments

I knew that both professors had put considerable effort, in travel and in planning, into holding a face-to-face workshop towards the end of the project. I had been personally disappointed and

a bit angry that, despite adequate notice and despite apparent enthusiasm by participants, only a few of us turned up. I also thought about the people who came for a few sessions and then did not continue. So I asked Professor Jess about disappointments she experienced. She answered:

Those that stopped coming? I think you and Kate and I all worried if it was because we weren't giving them enough chance to talk about their own concerns. But then we found out that most of them had other personal reasons. For me it was okay that people took the freedom to come as they could or wanted. And those who did come brought interesting issues.

The workshop? Yes, when we first realised that the few who were there were the only ones who were going to turn up, I felt disappointed. I had a cross poor-us moment, travelling down the country to be there and getting Kate to come from Australia, and what for? But then the small group of us had a wonderful workshop. Ahmad and Farzaneh debated their plans for University-led learning communities. We talked at length about the nature of learning. We talked about cultural expectations. We talked about insights we had gained through the project. In that session, it seemed that Kate and I were finally no longer turned to as the experts but rather were seen as collaborators, albeit with more experience, and could be argued with, sometimes passionately. So I became kind of glad about the way the workshop group turned out. And then, later, we got a number of very genuine apologies from people who had intended to come but couldn't. It was, after all, an awkward timing with the campus shift in mid progress and many people still away on the New Year break.

I am perhaps still disappointed that neither Kate nor I could stay on to provide an on-going opportunity for collaborative sharing and learning. I felt that, despite early dropouts, the community was really just beginning to function by the time we reached the end of your planned sessions. It would have had to change, of course, to keep meeting participants' continuing needs, but it had begun to find a rhythm. Or perhaps I'm just missing being on campus with students.

It seemed that Professor Jess was marginalising her disappointments. By lining up what did not happen against what in fact eventuated, she emphasised again the improvisational nature of learning communities. I understood she was again affirming that they did not follow a set of formal rules and that the learning that occurred arose out of the community itself.

Disappointment, she was suggesting, were more about deviations from what was planned: what was more important was consideration of what actually came out of the group.

40. The Eleventh (Final) session

The final session of the study was a very important one as it was used to draw together and conclude what had been gained from participating in the community.

Individuals' gains

It started with me sharing what I had learned. The first and most significant learning for me was that I, like many others, recognised that I was not alone and there were many other postgraduate students who had writing difficulties. It now seemed to be a natural part of the process of academic writing. When the participants started sharing their writing difficulties, it made me more conscious of the problems I had, and the ones that I had not noticed, and I got to learn ways of addressing them. I said:

These are problems that they have become aware of them and I have just missed them, and with the solutions that they gave, I learnt from them too. I also found out that how significant this collaboration between postgraduate students can be, how it can help them, as it has helped me.

I also acknowledged that I came to learn and understand that there were different approaches and styles of academic writing in different fields. I continued with explaining my feelings towards the research and how they had changed from the start of the study. At the initial stage of the study I did not feel positive about the research but gradually as the study proceeded, my feelings became more positive. I admitted:

To be honest I didn't really know if this learning community would have worked or not as well, but apparently it does.

I acknowledged some of the reasons I had become more positive were the continuous attendance of participants and their participation within the sessions, even if they came with differing intentions. Another reason was my discovery that the problems participants faced in their writings differed from one another. Whereas I had assumed that most of the problems that were going to be discussed would focus on surface errors, I later found them to be more about structural and deeper concerns.

Others then picked up from me. Mona said she appreciated the chance to send in her writing and get feedback, and added that she was still facing a difficulty in organising her thoughts and ideas. She explained that to address her difficulty, she put her thoughts and ideas in a table in

different categories so she could write with a logical flow and make rational meaning. This, in her mind, would make understanding and expression much easier.

Ahmad stated that participation had provided the initial stage of identifying a problem, which he found most important to address in his writing. He was an ESOL teacher. He explained that being part of a learning group allowed him to look at how others learn in a different way:

I'm looking at them from a different perspective, not the perspective of a teacher but a perspective of a colleague.

He named a key insight:

Identifying our weaknesses is a learning stage.

He added that, as his study was about adult learning, being part of the learning group and experiencing learning from the inside also improved his understanding of learning. He said:

It's not only learning about teaching but also learning about learning itself.

Seeing how participants reflect on their own work, he said, made him more critical towards his own writing:

I learned how to reflect again on my work because I see people reflecting on their work.

Moreover, Ahmad got to learn more about learning communities, how they can be established, and the important factors in getting participants and keeping them engaged.

Professor Kate then stated that her gains were similar. She had come to learn more about the diversity of students in learning, she said. Her previous assumption was that academic English had a specific meaning but realised that it was more complicated and had a different meaning for each person. She said:

I've learned during this study that all the participants are diverse and learn in different ways but also the fact that the focus was academic English and it seemed to me that we couldn't really at times separate the issue around academic English from the content of the material and I think it is the link between those three things that is really interesting me.

As an example, Professor Kate pointed out how Mona and Ahmad were different in their approaches in the learning community: Mona was more practical in her participation in the learning community, whereas Ahmad was more theoretical and shared ideas.

Farzaneh then talked about what she had gained. Firstly, like others, she realised that she was not alone. As well, Farzaneh found that, unlike others, she did not have grammatical problems. These realisations helped her confidence grow and helped her overcome her fears in writing. She reflected:

It encouraged me to a little bit let go of my fears of writing because I myself in my specific case I found out that the things that I was struggling with were different things.

She added that she appreciated the chance of getting feedback, especially from the facilitators:

It was really good that we had some feedback in the group, especially from you Professor Jess and Professor Kate.

Farzaneh admitted that she was not usually comfortable in sharing her writing and ideas but in the learning community, she felt that comfort. According to her, this stemmed from the relationship established with the facilitators. The fact that the facilitators were experienced supervisors assured her that the feedback she was getting was reliable and the learning community was more than a gathering of PhD students. She said:

I feel more comfortable talking about my issues around writing with you rather than with my own supervisors.

Ahmad and I then agreed that the attitude of the facilitators made a difference: we had no fear of sharing our problems with them. Ahmad reflected that there was a friendly and comfortable atmosphere, in which no one was dominant over the other. He said:

We feel comfortable because it is not like a supervisor or professor student relationship. It's just like a talk around the dinner table.

He asserted that the feeling of comfort eased the sharing of ideas and experience. For him, the enthusiasm and motivation of the facilitators in listening and helping without criticism was an important factor. The friendly discussions made learning tangible and comprehensible, he said.

Professor Jess added that she had learned while exploring with the participants:

I feel like a learner too.

Professor Kate added that she saw that everyone in the learning community was learning or trying to learn which in a way put everyone in the same position:

Maybe that's because we were learning as well. To me it was a community where everybody could learn. It didn't matter who you were or what your role was. It was an opportunity for everyone.

Exploring reasons for dropout

Farzaneh was particularly interested in finding out reasons why participants decided to drop out of the learning community. She asked:

What can we do to encourage people to come back?

She suggested that one possible reason was that not everyone got an equal chance to discuss their issues. Another possibility was that they may have got busy with their studies. Majid agreed, acknowledging:

I couldn't participate in these meetings as much as I needed to do.

In Mona's view, a reason for the drop out of the participants was due to the lack of understanding the intentions of the study. She reflected that some of the participants did not join from the very beginning and therefore did not fully understand the purpose of the study. She reflected:

I think one of the reasons that people didn't come back to the community is that some people come to these meetings, not from the beginning. They start from the second session or the third session, and it was not clear what the goal was. I think some of them think it is just for a research and they are participating as a participant for doing data collection or something like that. They didn't recognise that they can use this opportunity to improve their academic writing skills and they find out their weak points.

Professor Kate agreed, reflecting that participants initially joined to help as colleagues, and when they thought that their goal was achieved, they opted to drop out. Another possible factor that Mona pointed out was that most of the participants who remained and were more engaged were from Humanities rather than Sciences. She added that for those in Humanities, they found the learning community more important as academic writing was more critical for them. This observation came from experience, she said, as she had come from an Engineering background to Humanities.

Professor Jess wondered if participants decided to drop out of the learning community because the group was not an ongoing one:

This has been a slightly artificial learning community in that it won't go on after today in this form. They may not have had enough time to become interested. They were happy enough to come because they liked Mir and they didn't want to let him down in his project but they weren't really in the mind-set to want to share their problems perhaps.

Ahmad said that if participants had taken ownership of their learning then their participation would have been higher. He suggested an agenda could be developed that assured participants of addressing their needs through the study:

That could make it more connected to people's needs rather than coming to a session just to comment on other's work.

He added that, as students' needs were all different, this agenda could have been based on people's own ideas, which would have made them more committed. He suggested:

What we try to do is asking people to submit their work but they could have submitted their needs.

Professor Jess reminded him that such a request had been made in early sessions:

I remember that Mir and I and Professor Kate in different ways said 'could you come back to the next session with a set of priorities with what you like to work with' – and usually no one did.

The future

The future of the learning community was raised again in this session. Farzaneh urged that it should continue:

I believe that such learning communities are useful. How can we create and how can we just keep going? I'm keen on sharing my writing with all the members and reading theirs. So we can share our writings with each other and give feedbacks to each other, that's one thing that I would like to do if other members are also interested.

Majid suggested sharing writing through sending email as he could no longer participate physically but would like to send writing and give feedback on others' writings:

But the idea of sharing writings, I really like that. And even in the previous session that I was there I suggested Mona that she can send me her writings and I can send my writings to others and gather feedback so little by little we can correct ourselves.

Mona also showed interest in remaining part of the learning community. She said that in the past she was looking around the university to find a place that could help her with her writing and found the learning community useful for that aim:

Actually, before that learning community I searched for some places like research hubs or even the toastmasters. I found that these places are useful for me but we can't establish our toastmasters version.

Professor Kate suggested that the learning community could continue with a smaller group:

I guess then the question for all of you is whether do you set up your own little community, and it might be very tiny.

However, it was acknowledged that for the learning community to proceed there needed to be a convener. As I needed to start writing, I could not continue to be involved in organising meetings, although I was interested in participating in another role. Ahmad also indicated that he was at the end of his study and busy writing so he could not take the role. Professor Jess therefore suggested that Farzaneh could take the role of convener and organise the future meetings. Farzaneh accepted and acknowledged the importance of keeping the learning community. In her view, a learning community had already been shaped and had already established trust and connections among members and an understanding of each other's needs. Professor Kate and Professor Jess both showed interest in participating virtually in the learning community when required. In addition, they suggested that at important points during participants' studies like their practice orals, everyone could gather and give feedback on the person's practice.

The overall response in this session was that the participants who remained had found the community useful and had learned through it. Some of their learning included aspects of academic writing but other learning occurred as well. I then followed up the session with one-on-one interviews where possible, and with emails request for feedback from those who had only attended one or two sessions. I have integrated that final feedback into the narratives in this section.

4p. Kate's Story

Introducing Kate

Professor Kate came into the project as a result of a requirement from the ethics committee. She and Professor Jess had worked together previously, so they already had a working relationship, and she had knowledge and experience in action research. Professor Kate had also worked with international doctoral students, was a knowledgeable and experienced supervisor at another university, and had an interest in academic writing in English at the post-graduate level. She explained:

I came to this research project with experiences of having facilitated several learning communities in my own university. Initially, those communities were organised for undergraduate students, but the later communities were for doctoral students. In setting up the earlier communities with a colleague, we based the way we operated on a model of collaborative critical reflection. The four-step model involved confronting an issue in collaboration with others; deconstructing aspects of the issue in collaboration with others; theorising from multiple perspectives; and thinking otherwise about practice, that is, coming up with solutions to the problems that were raised. When I think back, I can remember being quite worried that we would not be able to keep undergraduate students engaged in discussion on particular topics. On one occasion, we even wrote possible questions and taped them under chairs in the room where the community was meeting, just in case the conversation stalled. We thought that the students could ask those questions if they couldn't think of any themselves. The questions were never needed. Certainly my later experiences confirmed that participants in learning communities always have ideas about what they want to discuss and it's about getting the discussion going rather than anything else.

So, in coming to your learning community, Mir, I felt totally relaxed about the whole idea of facilitating a discussion. I recognised the significance of the topic of academic writing, particularly for international doctoral students who have English as a second, or even third or fourth, language. Plus, I wasn't fazed by the nature of a virtual connection, as I have also had experience of establishing an online learning community, even though that was with school teachers, not doctoral students.

From the beginning I had seen how relaxed Professor Kate was about facilitating the group and as well her experience increased my confidence and made me feel I would be offering

something useful for my participants as well as involving them in my research. I also felt secure that she could reduce the chance of tension rising in the group. I now reflect on the importance of confident facilitation and discuss it further in Chapter Five.

Bridging the distance

Professor Kate was in Australia and although she had previous online experience, she acknowledged she felt the impact of distance:

It initially felt strange to be located in Australia, with most of the participants in New Zealand. However, I was most worried about the first session, mainly because I was coming ‘cold’ to that group.

She recalled words in the transcript I had sent her of the first session:

I said: “I’m Kate, and I agreed to help facilitate Mir’s sessions, so I’m thinking for today he’ll do some of the leading. And I’m in Australia.” In hindsight, that probably sounded rather clumsy. Of course I knew what the community was going to be about, but I didn’t have the detail that you had or any previous contact with the participants.

I was aware, of course, that you had expectations about what would be covered in the community discussions. In many ways, my relaxed approach quite possibly made you nervous. I was never worried about a lack of structure, because my expectations were that the students would drive where we went and what we talked about. I think that lack of structure probably worried you.

Professor Kate was right: it did worry me. It even scared me. I come from a background that predominantly used a quantitative approach to research, and where processes had to be planned to the last detail. I was, however, keen to learn new ways of doing research, and of teaching. I found from their comments that some other participants, from similar backgrounds to my own, were also concerned about the lack of overt structure. However, as I complete my thesis, I find that lack of pre-determined structure does not necessarily mean lack of planning. In Professor Kate’s case, the planning involved a readiness to go with participants’ needs and suggestions. It also involved being able to draw on an extensive repertoire of past experiences.

How a learning community works

In our final interview, Professor Kate elaborated on the way she envisaged a learning community operating:

My view of a learning community is that everyone, including the facilitator, comes to discussions as knowledgeable. That doesn't mean that everyone knows everything. But it does mean that participants will bring different knowledges, different ideas and different areas of expertise, but they come together because they have a common interest. In wanting the participants to see themselves and each other as knowledgeable, I really try to avoid hierarchies. For example, I don't ever want to be seen as the expert. Yes, you know, I am an expert in some things, but when we talk about a process such as writing then my way of doing things is only one way amongst many.

I regard the different expertise that each person brings as really important. This means, then, that I want to hear people talking and sharing their expertise and bringing multiple perspectives to whatever is being discussed. It's far better to have multiple solutions to problems rather than just one way of doing things. As a result of these things, I deliberately try not to talk too much. I do remember that in one of our debriefing sessions I commented that I had talked too much. I don't like doing that and I see myself as a weak facilitator in those situations. I prefer to encourage others to talk. Sometimes I repeat what people have said or contributed to the discussion, and sometimes I try to get further input, new ideas, from those who haven't been talking. This is where I am thinking about the model of collaborative critical reflection, using the contributions of different participants to show that there are multiple perspectives. I also try to make sure that there is some talk about what is called 'thinking otherwise' in the model of collaborative critical reflection. This is where I want those involved in a discussion to think about what they might do differently. That's the 'so what' – What might I do now? How might I change what I do? What could I try to do differently?

The reports of individual sessions that accompany these participant narratives, offer many examples of Professor Kate encouraging critical reflection. It also seemed that Professor Kate was not happy when she found herself talking too much in a session and giving answers to questions, rather than fostering problem-solving by all participants. The following is from one of her written reflections on a session:

I am going to start with things that are bothering me... I came away from yesterday feeling that I had done a bad job of facilitating. I did what I do not like to do – i.e., giving answers about things.

Another thing that bothered me is the balance between meeting the needs of the group and the individual. To be honest, I am not sure how to do that. Academic writing is a broad topic and individual concerns tend to be very narrow. Yesterday, when I made the decision to talk briefly about Farzaneh's writing, I feel that I failed everyone. On the one hand, I didn't want to bore the overall group, and, on the other hand, I wanted to try to give something back to Farzaneh since she had been willing to share a piece of her writing. Yet I feel that I failed everyone, because I probably didn't give enough feedback to be useful to Farzaneh and I may have excluded other group members along the way.

I was also worried that trying to be brief removes the complexities and can then give wrong ideas. I was particularly concerned about suggesting to all, but Farzaneh in particular, that supervisors sometimes do not know the answers. I hope I didn't give the wrong idea. I am a supervisor and I don't always know the answer. I often know *an* answer, rather than *the* answer.

Professor Kate emphasised the importance of allowing the group to set direction and not dominating the discussion herself, yet at the same time she voiced concerns about whether she has given enough advice. I reflect that her comments highlight the complexity of the role of facilitator: it calls for a constant process of paying attention to the group and adjusting interventions.

Disadvantage of online facilitation

Professor Kate's written reflection turned to considering the impact of facilitating through a screen:

I also wondered about the silence of some participants. That might be okay or it might not be okay. And I don't know which it is... My thinking about that ties with what I think may be a disadvantage. Jess and I have both been on a screen, rather than sitting in person with the group. Does that make a difference? I suspect it might, but I'm not sure. I wonder if the screen (which is where Jess and I are) is a distraction for some participants. I guess I would prefer to be sitting at the table, but I can't fly to New Zealand every two weeks.

As I consider this comment a year after the project finished and after six months of various levels of COVID-19 lockdown and social distancing, I wonder if a screen presence is becoming

a new commonplace. Very few of the postgraduate students in my College come to university to work now. We have not attended any conferences this year or given any seminars or had group meetings. If indeed a screen presence inhibits the flow of discussion, then it now seems really important to find ways of counteracting the distancing and increasing the interaction. However, part of the challenge during the community of learning was that some participants were face-to-face and others were online.

Professor Kate's written reflection then looked towards bridging the gap:

So what does this mean for moving forward? Firstly, I think we need to check about the process with participants. I wonder whether we need to talk explicitly about the action research process, with the slant that the process needs to be working for participants. Does that mean that perhaps we need to reflect on what information they are taking away from the sessions? Could we perhaps start the next session with asking for some insights about that? That assumes that we have some of the same participants back, which I think we will.

Secondly, I'm wondering whether it might be helpful to make a problem-solving/critical reflection process explicit. For example, identifying an issue, deconstructing it, thinking about possible solutions, trying it out. Perhaps that would make some ideas more concrete.

In our final interview, I took Professor Kate back to her reflections about the participatory action research approach of my research. She stated:

Are you asking whether I think your study was participatory action research or not? I don't think there's a simple answer to that. We usually define PAR in terms of the research participants collaborating with the researcher so that the issue or challenge or whatever the focus is becomes one of problem-solving, trying things, reflecting on how they worked, adjusting, etc... In your project, there was certainly collaboration especially between you, Jess and me. We tried to get the project to evolve from what the research participants told us – their needs, their weaknesses, their questions, and even their confusions in relation to academic writing. We individually wrote reflections on each session and we debriefed as a team of three after every session.

What we didn't do was involve the participants directly in those processes that occurred between sessions. Even so, we were drawing on what they told us during the sessions and on information that was coming directly to you.

So when I think about your project, oh my goodness it's a bit complicated. You were focusing on doctoral students' academic writing and the focus was on how *they, the students* [emphasised] could do that better. And the learning community was about how as a group they could learn to do that.

This is where I think there was a tension. I know the participants, the students, indicated that they wanted more structure. Yet, if we had started giving them prepared lessons as such, we wouldn't have been achieving the aims of the learning community.

So, if we go back to your original question about participatory action research, I think the project was that, but it operated differently from the usual PAR projects that we read about.

Professor Kate's observations resonate with my evolving understandings of how action research operated in this project and the extent to which it was participatory. As I explain in Sections 4b, 4f, 4k, 4m, and 4o of this chapter I consider there was an action research process throughout the development of this project and it gradually became participatory involving the facilitators and myself. At a different level, small further cycles of participatory action research occurred in some of the group sessions when participants actively discussed an issue that was raised and searched for ways to overcome the problem.

Reflecting on participants' comments and theory

It was obvious from the data that Professor Kate enjoyed theorising what was happening in my research project. This is demonstrated in her reflection after the face-to-face workshop.

Ahmad argued that a learning community might work better if students are at the same stage of learning. I do not know if that is the case, because this is such a taken-for-granted idea for all of us. For example, schooling is based on students' ages and assumes that learning is developmental. Even universities, to some extent, build degrees on the idea that groups of students will be at a similar year level. But is this the case?

Gee (2004) suggests that learning can occur with experts and novices in the same group. I think that a learning community generally brings experts and novices together, but

there is a common or shared interest. A member of a learning community might be an expert in something, but a novice in other aspects of learning. Other members might have different skills and knowledges. Gee suggests that learning can be powerful when such a group comes together.

I think that those who advocate for group work and group learning would say that there are benefits in articulating something to those who do not understand.

After the workshop sessions, all the participants wrote and shared reflections. At various stages in the project, both professors and I shared our reflections with the other participants, to provide examples of reflection and to provoke their feedback. There was relatively little feedback from the student participants. In retrospect I ask myself if we should have provided stronger scaffolds for feedback. Or would that have created a structure that was more like a classroom than a learning community?

Learning, and its relation to academic writing

In many debriefs and written reflections Professor Kate talked about learning. In our final interview I asked her more about that. She said:

I certainly thought about learning a lot during your project. I started to think about Gee's notion of affinity spaces.

Of course, the focus for learning was academic writing, but in reality the learning was much broader than that. Academic writing in itself is a rather complex topic. Through academic writing we present an identity. Through academic writing, we position ourselves as part of an academic community. From a writing perspective, we adjust our writing so that it's appropriate for audience and purpose. And that means that the doctoral students are all focused on writing for an academic audience, basically their examiners. Getting that writing right is really important. I guess you'd say it has linguistic components obviously because we use language to write, social components getting the interaction between writer and reader correct, and cultural components following the cultural practices that are accepted in academia.

What I find interesting, though, is that when people want to help others with academic writing, they often talk about focusing on the aspects that you might refer to as code-breaking. While these are important, they're not the only thing that's important when we write. We need a range of resources to be literate – we need to be able to code-break,

but we also need to make meaning, to get the purpose right and according to the conventions of writing for that purpose, and realise that how we shape a text will influence how it is read and understood. Being able to do all of those things allows us to write effectively. Yes, all of those aspects are necessary.

In some ways, that came through in our discussions with the students in the learning community. They were concerned about issues much broader than code-breaking. I remember in one session we had a discussion about a report written by the student from chemical Engineering, Vida. From memory, the conversation considered the content of the writing, what meaning was made, how it was structured, all of those things. I think that showed how the students could see the broader picture of writing and how important it is to sound like you're an expert in the discipline where you're studying. I remember thinking that it was one of those very, very messy conversations. Everyone was looking at different things. But, that's what I think should happen in a learning community. Everyone brings different expertise and that allows the person whose writing is on show to see that there are multiple ways of looking at the writing. If I had to say what's useful, I'd say it's the talk or conversation around those points. Talk can help us to deepen our understandings, ask for clarification, seek more information.

At the beginning of my project I would have been very uncomfortable with the way Professor Kate describes both learning and academic writing in these comments. Now I am still a bit nervous, but I am beginning to appreciate the value of open-ended learning opportunities and to acknowledge that only some aspects of learning can be measured or even clearly identified. I am beginning to think that the slightly intangible aspect of learning is one of the things that makes a learning community important.

Talk, discourse, collaboration and problem-solving

Professor Kate acknowledged that the student participants were juggling a range of expectations and demands: that many had joined because of their commitment to a fellow doctoral student and were unsure of what they expected to learn. In a critical reflection she wrote:

The participants are immersed in a context that expects that they are progressing in terms of their doctoral study and a learning community that relies on talk about

academic writing is perhaps not seen as having crucial benefits. I think there are tensions here.

I suspect that those who have participated have learned lots during the series of workshops and that this learning encourages them to return for other workshops. Yet I am convinced that the learning is not necessarily related to academic writing in a narrow sense, but much more to the broader issues of doctoral study and academic writing. For me, this raises questions about academic writing. Becoming an academic writer is about being enculturated into particular discourses.

Interactions between and among the workshop participants enabled discussion about academic writing, ideas to be shared, theories to be introduced and critiqued, and possibilities for action to be suggested.

In wanting to help the participants know more about their academic writing, we had asked them about the challenges they experienced with writing. In addition, we were hopeful that change would occur in relation to the participants' writing. In other words, we were expecting learning; that is, that the participants would take ideas away from the workshops, try them out, and shape them to fit their own writing. The workshop process was, for me, one of collaborative problem-solving.

I realised that learning was occurring in multiple layers of the workshop process... The workshop participants have expertise in particular fields of study, whether that be areas of Education or science. They also have expertise in particular aspects of academic writing, even though they have identified as needing assistance. The workshops encourage the participants to interact and to share what they know, as a way of problem-solving what they see as 'problems' in their writing. Tacit knowledge is acknowledged and the interactions in the affinity space help participants to articulate their tacit knowledge.

In Gee's (2004) words, "learning becomes both a personal and a unique trajectory through a complex space of opportunities ... and a social journey as one shares aspects of that trajectory with others" (p. 89)... For me, my *aha* moment was a way of explaining how learning is able to occur in what might seem an unstructured learning environment.

While I still struggle to fully understand some of Professor Kate's theoretical concepts, her comments open my mind to looking at what happening in the group in ways that go beyond judgement of success or failure. I seek to reflect this understanding in the discussion in Chapter Five.

Building relationships and trust

In our final interview Professor Kate talked about trust and building relationships:

Strangely, I think the learning community was just starting to function really well at the end of the project. That workshop, the one where I attended in person rather than online, seemed to be a critical point. It seems a shame that the community couldn't continue beyond your project... If we look back to how the learning community developed over time, I think we'd say that it took a few weeks at the beginning for the participants to get to know each other and to have trust in the process. If you think about what I've said previously about me talking too much in some sessions, this was at the beginning of the project when the doctoral students weren't too keen on sharing their writing with everyone. I can understand that. They didn't know how we would react, what we'd say, to what extent we'd critique or criticise their writing. They didn't know how uncomfortable it might be for them. As time went on and we got to know each other better, the participants began to buy in to what was on offer. At that point, they knew it was safe to share their writing. They knew they weren't going to be embarrassed by what we said. An interesting question would be why we seemed to achieve that point in the session when I was there in person... Perhaps the participants had just got to the point of really trusting us. Or maybe because it was almost the last week and they knew they wouldn't have to share too much more writing. And of course there was no-one online that week and I certainly enjoyed the face-to-face experience. I don't know whether any of those things made a difference, but it is interesting to speculate. Having said that, I do think that we had built relationships with the participants during the project and the learning community was regarded as a safe and supportive environment.

Professor Kate's comments highlight the evolving nature of learning communities. I reflect that it was perhaps somewhat artificial to create one that would fit into the time span of my doctoral research. Perhaps participants need time to become accustomed to this way of working and to being to trust it, and each other. Perhaps this project was mainly an opportunity to learn

how a learning community could work, in order to be able to develop on-going communities in the future.

Overall outcomes

I asked Professor Kate how she saw the overall outcomes. She said:

Did we achieve what we set out to achieve? I think it's very difficult for me to explain the overall outcomes because I can only speak for myself. I think that a lot of learning occurred, but it may not all be what you expect. Actually, I think that the learning was much broader than just academic English. I'm sure you're asking the participants what they learned. That will be insightful, because I think the learning will have been different for everyone.

Since the participants in your research project were doctoral students, Jess and I brought particular expertise to the learning community. We were already successful writers. We have been through the doctoral process and we graduated with doctorates. We have academic careers and we've published successfully. I guess that puts us in the expert category in relation to experience of academic writing. However, we don't have those immediate experiences of doing a doctorate and we don't have the field knowledge that the other participants have. So we are both experts and novices, depending on what type of knowledge is expected at the time. Having participated in the learning community, I have experience of the trust, collegiality and willingness to share that developed. It was a fruitful exercise for me. I enjoyed the discussions and I learnt from the other members of the community.

Professor Kate speculated that "the learning will have been different for everyone". The accounts in this chapter do show the range of perceptions and evaluations. That range is in itself important as the process was one that was both individual and interactive. A phenomenological approach places emphasis on individual perceptions and understandings rather than striving for some externally evaluated objective reality. So at one level, this collage of narratives and reports, interwoven with my personal critical reflections, is the summation of my findings.

However, I also position myself as the researcher. In the next chapter, therefore, I look back at this collage of personalised perceptions and at the overall process of the project and offer further discussion, from my viewpoint, of what occurred and what might be learned from it.

4q. My Story

Who am I?

I completed my Masters in the field of Teaching English as a Foreign Language and my research had been on improving second language speakers' language abilities. However, my Masters thesis and other research articles I had worked on were all quantitative and I had no experience in qualitative research. When I came to New Zealand for my PhD, I had to work to finance my studies so I started teaching English to second language speakers. Whereas I had taught English to Iranians before, this teaching experience brought new challenges as I did not always share the same language with my students. It therefore gave me the chance to learn and improve my teaching skills.

When I decided to conduct this study on speakers of English as an additional language, I had considered my personal and research background. I am a second language speaker of English although I learned English while living in Glasgow, Scotland with my family, between the ages of ten and fifteen. In those years English was my everyday language, did not ensure I knew all the rules of written grammar, and certainly not academic writing rules.

I learned about my problems through listening to others talk

As I was also a postgraduate second language speaker in the study, I shared many characteristics with the participants and therefore, apart from being the researcher, I was also a participant. Having to write a thesis in the same university as others, I also had writing difficulties. As I am a teacher, I have developed the role of an instructor. However, the learning community gave me a chance to put myself into the shoes of a student and learner again.

During the study, although I considered myself as a participant, I preferred to listen more than to talk, to give others the chance to speak and so gain more data. However, there were times when I also talked in the learning community in order to provoke ideas or give examples through sharing my experience. In one of the sessions, the participants were talking about linking words and their lack of vocabulary for that purpose. As I had a list that I was using, I shared it with them.

Throughout the study I listened to the participants talk about their academic writing difficulties and later heard their recordings while transcribing and reflected on them based on my own experience. Through my reflections, I came to realise that I had much more in common with the participants than I had anticipated. In addition, listening to what the participants shared, I

realised that there were aspects to academic writing that I had not been aware of. I learned more about myself, my writing, my views on writing, my stance in research and the overall PhD journey. For example, Diba reflected on the loneliness of the PhD journey. Before she shared this experience, I had not thought about the PhD journey's social side. Moreover, while writing I had believed that other students were proficient writers with minor issues. In the discussions that followed Diba's reflection, I realised that I was not alone.

During my postgraduate studies, I assumed that academic writing difficulties would mostly be related to surface errors and less to deeper problems. However, this idea was changed within the learning community. As the learning community proceeded and the participants continued sharing their writing concerns, I came to realise that these second language speaker students were struggling mostly with expression of ideas rather than surface errors.

When the participants shared their surface errors, it was easier for the learning community to both understand them and address them. When I later began writing my chapters and started reflecting on my own writing in more in depth, I realised that the surface errors the participants had, I also struggled with (like where to put the *apostrophe* and the *s*) all of which could easily be addressed by learning the rules. However, when it came to the expression of ideas, addressing these became much more time consuming and difficult. The most difficulty I also had in my writing was expression of ideas. One example was when I wanted to write narratives and found that writing precisely, having a flow, developing the ideas, and discussing the exact idea was the most difficult part of my writing. These were not problems that I could just read about and address; they needed deep thought and practice over time.

Another issue discussed in the learning community that I learned from was putting personal opinions, views, and experiences in an introduction. My view was that the introduction should include fact and concrete material but I learned differently from others. Diba stated that including personal views in the introduction gives it a touch of the writer's view and helps connect the writer with the reader, allowing better understanding. Angy thought that part of the nature of action research is that it includes the researcher's views and opinions, since the researcher is part of the research study and his or her views matter. Ahmad suggested that adding opinion depends on the paradigm, design, and method being followed that in turn sets the rules and the way writing is regarded. Therefore, I learnt that the field of study and approach can determine the language and style used in academic writing.

As writing progressed, I realised that having difficulty in the expression of ideas is not something that can be addressed forever; rather it is a difficulty faced in any writing. During my writing, whether it was the literature review, narratives, introduction or conclusion, I continuously struggled to express my ideas in a way that would be logical, coherent, cohesive, and precise. I consider myself a fluent speaker of English but fluency in speaking is different from being a good academic writer. The group discussions helped me realise that writing, especially in qualitative studies, has a story format with academic rules. My fluency did not help my ability to be a good writer, but it was rather learning and practising writing over time that improved my writing.

Developing confidence to take an active role as a co-facilitator

As I noted, initially when I started the study, my role was to be that of the researcher within the study, and a co-learner. However, as the learning community proceeded my role developed.

During the sessions it became clear that the facilitators' online participation had its downsides. One of the problems was that the facilitators were not able to see everyone clearly and read their faces. As a result, participants sometimes did not get an equal chance to share and talk. The facilitators were both very open to getting feedback. In the debriefs I had with the facilitators after each session, I informed them of what I had experienced in the room. When I informed them of the problems that had been raised due to lack of physical presence, the facilitators took notice and proposed that I would become the co-facilitator of the study.

Taking the role of a co-facilitator was not what I had anticipated doing in the study. This was an extra role on top of being the researcher and co-learner and I did not have the confidence for it, although I knew it was needed for the study.

As the co-facilitator my role was to mediate and make sure that everyone got a fair chance to share their thoughts and ideas. Further, I would observe the participants and their reactions and try to inform the facilitators of matters that I thought they would not be able to see or sense virtually. In some of the discussions, ideas were proposed that I could act on. One was their need to share writings with one another, which was not easy through email. One suggestion was that a group could be created on the university Learn website, which everyone could use. I did establish the forum, although it had little use.

My other role was to coordinate between the participants and the facilitators to decide the length of the study. Towards the end, I started getting the feeling that the participants were

struggling to attend the sessions. My role was to discover their true feelings and then discuss these with the facilitators.

As the learning community proceeded and I developed my co-facilitator role, my attitude towards it gradually changed. My role in the learning community felt more critical and influential. Further, the responsibility of being the co-facilitator increased my sense of ownership, which in turn increased my commitment towards the study and participants.

What I learned about facilitation

As discussed earlier in this Chapter my ethics approval led to there being two professors as facilitators of the group.

During the whole study I relied on the facilitators to ensure that the discussion of participants would stay within the limits of ethics and on the planned topic. I was aware that having facilitators who were experienced, knowledgeable, and respected would reassure the participants of the seriousness of the study and the expectation that they could get reliable feedback would be another motivational factor.

When challenges were faced during the learning community, the facilitators listened to the participants, identified their needs, and gave them feedback. They ensured the flow of the learning community and made changes and improvements to plans as needed. The participants initially struggled to feel comfortable and develop the trust that was needed for them to share their writing difficulties. The facilitators through their feedback, explanations, and questions created an atmosphere where the participants came to realise that no judgement was being made. When the participants struggled with understanding a concept, the facilitators would give a short introductory explanation.

Further, they did not portray themselves as gurus and helped in creating a comfortable environment. One of my data gathering means was participants' journals, which they could send to me if they chose. As I was not proficient in writing journals and none of the participants were either, the facilitators helped by setting an example. They both wrote journals reflecting on a session and sent it to the participants to offer a structural example, which also reassured the participants of the seriousness of the study. When participation decreased - which I assumed it was due to low motivation - the facilitators sent out a survey to identify participants' needs so as to be able to align sessions with those needs.

My reflection about and analysis of the study did not begin at the end, but rather took place after each session, and during the Christmas break. As I was a novice researcher, I needed the facilitators' advice and guidance on approaches I could take in the analysis. After each session, through our reflections, I got the facilitators' advice and during the Christmas holidays I used their advice to reflect on the transcripts, find themes and integrate the design of the study. Before beginning the project I had struggled with the two related concepts of agency and self-efficacy as I had understood them from the literature. The facilitators' advice helped me to understand that while we could not presume to know what was going inside the participants' minds, we could observe their behaviour in the group. I realised that it was agency, the shaping of intentions and putting them into action that I was concerned with rather than the more psychological concept of self-efficiency.

Having two facilitators in the study did initially make me worried that one might take over, however, the result proved otherwise. The two facilitators kept a balance in their participation and when one was not available to attend a session, the other filled in, but they kept themselves informed of the session proceedings. Moreover, if there had been a single facilitator, it might have affected my role and I would not have developed the confidence to state my opinions especially in the debriefs after each session. Having two facilitators allowed a conversation to be established between the facilitators and gave me the opportunity to be involved and to reflect.

Reflecting on my observation of the facilitators' facilitation of the study, I learned various strategies that I will use in the future during my career. The facilitators were experienced in dealing with international postgraduate students' needs and were able to understand their struggles. They would pay attention to all the participants and carefully listen to what they said and based on their knowledge and consideration give them feedback in the form of suggestions rather than directions. Sometimes their feedback was first by listening to all the strategies suggested by everyone in the group, then responding with their experience in observing students, approving those strategies that were most useful, and finally summing up. However, not all their responses were straightforward. At times, in order to deepen thought the facilitators challenged the students. At other times to clarify their difficulties, they asked them to bring writing samples. When the participants did not talk and needed provoking, the facilitators would ask questions, explain, exemplify or set goals, trying to increase their criticality and awareness.

Within the learning community and in our interviews, both facilitators listened and were open to suggestions and criticism regarding the learning community or their role. They both acknowledged that the participants were the main people supposed to lead the learning community. There were times when issues were raised that made me panic and become pessimistic. An example was when I felt that the participants were not getting the chance to talk and I thought that they would start to drop out. At those times the facilitators would calm me down in the debrief and optimistically look for ways of dealing with each issue.

As I reflect on the facilitation, I note how important facilitation is to the shaping of a learning community, especially at the start. I think that too directive a style could easily turn the sessions into lectures or tutorials and too little feedback would not give participants security. Perhaps in time the participants themselves could manage a learning community on their own, but facilitation seems to be essential for bringing people together and developing a process of communication and sharing.

Culture

Participation in the group also deepened my awareness of the impact of culture.

The study was set up with the intention that the participants would come together and raise issues they were facing, get feedback from each other and guidance from the facilitators, decide on some strategies, carry them out and report back. This meant that the study was participant-centred and ideas had to come from within the learning community. At the start, some of the participants struggled with understanding the concept of the learning community. This was due to various factors, but I consider one of the key reasons was cultural.

The majority of the participants in this learning community came from a Middle Eastern background. As I shared many similar cultural similarities with them, it helped with my understanding by relating their behaviours to my experience. It could be said that generally in the Middle Eastern systems of education, pupils go to schools that are teacher-centred. All the pupils sit in rows facing the teacher who lectures and the students are only allowed to ask the teacher questions. This continues into university where students face the lecturer in single seats and only ask questions when permitted. The only place that students sit in a circle and may be provoked to talk to each other are English language classes, but even there learning is based on the central role of the teacher. Talking from my own experience, I believe the concept of a learning community is unknown in this kind of context. This could also relate to other aspects

in Middle Eastern cultures where people are taught to follow leaders in different aspects like religion, politics or social traditions.

As I went to school in the United Kingdom and have been teaching at language institutes in New Zealand I have noticed differences. In all classes, students sit in round tables that invite conversation. Many of the teaching methods also require the participants to talk to each other at round tables, hence making the students the centre of class.

The participants in this study, who were mostly Iranians, initially looked towards the facilitators and saw them as the centre of the learning community. When they shared their ideas, their first intention was to seek feedback from the facilitators and not the other participants within the study. Further, as they had been used to teacher centred learning; they were looking for teaching sessions from the study. As the study proceeded, those who stayed gained a better understanding of the nature of a learning community and adapted themselves to it, but whatever the topic of the session was, they still wanted to hear the facilitators to have the final say.

I reflect that in any future work to develop a learning community I need to carefully consider the cultural expectations of participants and give more time at the beginning to setting up strategies for sharing ideas with each other. I still need to further develop such strategies.

Value in talking, but needs leadership

My university provides students with a student support centre including some classes they could join to learn about academic writing. In the academic centres, students would have a one to one conversation with a specialist and in a class, they usually get taught set material. The learning community, however, gave the participants the chance to meet other students who were studying towards the same degree. In the learning community they were able to talk to each other and listen to the problems others were facing, and realise other concepts and realities that during their individual PhD studies they were not able to notice.

Listening to the participants and reflecting on my own experience, PhD study is considered a lonely research journey. As our study is research based and we focus on our own individual projects, we do not interact with one another in our studies. When we face difficulties in writing, we are able to refer to academic centres, but there is little interaction among students.

Reflecting on the participants, I realised that, although at the beginning they struggled to maintain trust and connection with each other, later they enjoyed and cherished their

conversations. A main factor that stimulated their discussions was acknowledgement that they shared some difficulties and, as a result, they realised they were not alone. This gave the participants more confidence that their writing might not be so bad and the courage to continue. The other factors included the comfortable feeling they had due to the atmosphere of the study, the facilitators and their attitudes, and the fact that they realised no judgement was being made on them. Further, participants had the chance to get feedback from a learning community that motivated them to share; they could benefit from a variety of perspectives and have experts in the group to assure them of reliable feedback, but not judge them.

In many sessions, more specifically during the workshop and final session, the participants emphasised the lack of interactive support in their doctoral journey. In their view, this interaction was more significant if it had a leader in the form of an academic, but in a power-free context. In my perspective, their worries about their supervisors' judgement of their writing and their feedback showed that there is a communication gap between some students and their supervisors. This gap does not allow the student to comfortably talk about his or her writing difficulties and so prevents the supervisor from taking effective steps to addressing them.

Differences in needs

The learning community was composed of participants from both Humanities and Sciences. Having them together gave me the opportunity to find the difficulties each was facing, and how they might differ in approaching academic writing. Nor were all the participants at the same stage of their study, although nearly all were PhD students. This also helped me to understand the difficulties students faced at different stages of their study and how they could give feedback to each other.

These factors made the learning community less homogeneous. Participants from both Sciences and Humanities considered there would be more benefits if the group was more homogenous. There were those like Ahmad who thought that participants should be from the same stage of their study so that they would be going through similar experiences in writing. Other participants like Vida thought that participants should be from the same field of study so that they could understand each other's problems and give proper feedback. It became evident to me that academic writing was seen as more important for those in Humanities and they were more focused on the actual writing itself, while for those in sciences the content of their writing was more significant. However, I also realised that styles of writing are not definitive and there

can be writing that is accepted as academic but does not fit in any of the set styles. Further, the difference in styles of writing allowed the participants to increase their awareness of what academic writing involves and to acknowledge differences in academic writing among fields and appreciate them.

I reflect that having homogenous groups may have been better for the participants, although that assumption needs further research. Such a selection of participants did not eventuate in this study as my time was limited and I depended on participants responding to my invitations. If the university was to set up and develop learning communities, as participants suggested it the final sessions and in their final interviews, then it would be possible to ensure there was more commonality among participants. I acknowledge that to some extent, my group was an artificial one, and if I was an academic working in a particular department, the group I would set up would naturally be more homogenous.

What I learned about learning communities

The learning community did not come into existence from the beginning as time and work was needed for it to develop. The participants initially came together in the form of a group and all were doing or had done their PhD but did not all share the same expectations. There were those who had read the information sheet and email clearly and knew the main objective of the study. On the other hand, there were those who had joined to help me as a compatriot or a friend and did not have a clear idea about its purposes. The participants each had their own expectations, and some thought of it as more of a class rather than a learning community. Initially I gave the participants an introduction on the study and its purpose on the first session for clarification. The facilitators did follow up during the sessions by trying to define the purpose further for the participants.

As the study proceeded, I realised that the participants came to a gradual understanding of the purpose of the learning community. Their understanding lead them to making various decisions. Some, when they gained a better understanding, left as the learning community did not answer their needs. Others stayed and participated to the point when they felt their needs were met. Another group participated throughout not only to help a compatriot, but also because they felt they were learning. Those that did stay showed more motivation through talking, sharing parts of their writing and seeking feedback as they had a goal they were working towards. This, for me, meant that without personal motivation, participants would not

participate, as there was no other obligation to keep them within the study and they were all engaged with their own research projects.

However, I came to realise that sharing writing and thoughts was not so easy through the learning community. In the first few sessions more participants took part and a common statement they made was that they did not get a chance to share their opinions. I also noticed that during sessions with fewer participants each person got enough time to share his or her thoughts and ideas in more depth. However, if there were only two participants, not enough ideas were shared to have discussions and there was a decrease in motivation.

Trust between members of the learning community was another factor that needed time to build. Participants were asked to share their difficulties and writings, which they might have been criticised about and which could have threatened their face. It therefore took several sessions before the participants were willing to share. They were encouraged by explanations of the purposes of the study and by the facilitators reassurances of confidentiality. I came to realise that discussions are a main focus of the learning community and that they allow critiques that are built on trust.

Another of my insights was that a learning community is not created just by bringing a group together. In my future work in this field I need to realise that participants will not automatically trust each other and will need to find their own comfort space within the group before they are willing to share and so create a collaborative learning space.

Agency

My understanding of agency is based on the work of Bandura (2006), and is considered as an individual's free will and ability to carry controlled thoughts and actions in their own and outside world. In this study, my first intention was to reflect on the participants' agency in terms of addressing academic writing and their difficulties. As the study proceeded, I gradually came to realise that agency cannot be limited to academic writing and it takes various forms.

Each participant within the learning community came to show their agency in different ways, both those who stayed and those who left. Everybody that joined the learning community showed agency in pursuing a goal, which was either to improve their academic writing or help a compatriot. There were those who left the study after a session, and had the will to leave the study realising that the study was not addressing their needs. Others who continued and left when their needs were addressed, like Vida, also showed agency in taking actions. There were

others like Majid who showed their agency by taking responsibility towards the decision they made to join the learning community. Majid joined midway through the study but continued to the end and believed that when people decided to participate they should take responsibility.

Ahmad did not share any piece of writing, but showed his agency by taking initiative, starting conversations and giving feedback to others. Participants like Mona and Farzaneh also took initiative and brought up topics. Mona took a further step and not only brought her writing to the learning community but also shared her writing through emails seeking feedback and shared websites on the forum.

My initial understanding of agency was that commitment to the learning community and its goals was equal to high agency and as participants moved away from these, they lost their agency. However, as I deepened my understanding of agency, I realised that decisiveness in sticking to the decisions was also an evidence of agency. Each participant made a decision based on his or her understanding and needs, and took steps towards it that showed agency in its own form.

Online communication: potentials and problems

The initial plan for the study was to have everyone, student participants, facilitator and I, gather in a room. However, as with any study, not everything went according to plan and change was needed. One of the major problems that occurred concerned facilitation. First of all, to meet the requirements of the ethics committee, the study needed two facilitators instead of one. Second, Professor Kate lived in Australia, and the other facilitator, Professor Jess had to stay in another city in the north of New Zealand due to unexpected personal reasons. I had two options, either to abandon the study, or to improvise.

Discussing the issue with the facilitators, we decided that they could participate through an online platform. This was easily possible as the meeting room used for the learning community in the old building had two big screens and a webcam, set up for online meetings. At first Skype was selected for virtual connection, which also enabled Diba to join in, although she still struggled to connect due to the slow internet connection in Iran. Later due to the convenience of Zoom in connection and recording, we changed the platform. However, this made connection for Diba more difficult as Zoom is filtered in Iran, leading her to use proxies that further slowed her connection, and became a reason for her to dropout. At other times, it

enabled Majid and Sima who were both in Christchurch but could not attend the session in person, to participate.

Using the online platform made the study possible and also made it possible for one of the facilitators to take over if the other could not attend. Further, it made it possible for both the facilitators and participants to attend the session from wherever they were. Nevertheless, it was not all positive and using the online platform had its downsides.

Initially the facilitators struggled to see everyone in the room or to see their reactions and thus make a better evaluation of the atmosphere. When we moved to the new building, as the facilities were still in the process of being set up, I had to use my laptop. My laptop had a small screen, which made it hard for the participants to see the facilitators, and the camera did not have a wide angle so it was even harder for the facilitators to see the participants. In addition, it did not have loud speakers, which made it hard for the participants to hear, and the microphone only worked at a certain angle, which made it difficult for the facilitators to hear the participants, and the laptop had to be rotated constantly.

In retrospect, after my experiences of using Zoom during the Covid-19 lockdown, I wonder if it might have been better if we had all been individually on Zoom through separate laptops. In that way we would all have the same ability to see the expressions on faces and to hear clearly. However, we would then totally lose the informality of interaction and take very deliberate turns at speaking. I look forward to explore the potential of the technology further.

Not measuring

Before starting this research, I had done my Master's thesis using a quantitative approach. Through my Masters, we had been taught research only from a quantitative perspective and had never been taught qualitative research, though we had been told about its existence. Everyone around me, including my father, had all done research quantitatively and hence my experience had lead me in a way that I always wanted to measure everything.

When I started my PhD, I got to learn about qualitative research and the way research is conducted in the approach. It took me nearly three months to accept qualitative approach as a form of research but I wanted to learn and understand it, as I wanted to widen my knowledge and abilities. I gradually learned more about qualitative research and put what I was learning into practice, but still in the back of my mind was a quantitative perspective that constantly

interfered and wanted to measure data. This was evident in my early writing as I numbered everything and wanted to analyse based on numbers.

Through reading more and talks and reflection with the facilitators of the group, I deepened my knowledge and understanding of qualitative research, and I gradually surrendered the desire to measure all the data. I have begun to understand that many outcomes are multifaceted and are more usefully described and interpreted. Both through participating in discussion in the group and through collating and considering the data I gathered, I gained deeper insights into the possibilities and practices of qualitative research.

Chapter Five: Discussion and conclusion

Introduction

What occurred during the project and what it meant to participants has been reported in the previous chapters. This chapter picks issues from the narratives and session reports for further discussion. I start by discussing the limitations of the project and the way these make this case differ somewhat from what may occur in a non-experimental learning community. I continue by discussing the following:

- Participants' concerns about academic writing
- Understanding supervisors' feedback
- Structure and flexibility
- The value of talk
- Evolving roles
- Power and its movement
- Collaboration
- Online participation
- Agency
- Participants' recommendations

Then I return to my research question and follow this by making recommendations. Finally, I briefly discuss my plans for further work and research.

Limitations of the project

Because the study had been set up specifically for my research, the group that came together for the project differed from many doctoral learning communities that evolve over years and are centred around a supervisor or a research field (Greenwood, 2020; Henderson & Noble, 2015). This difference had a number of significant aspects. Not only were the members from very different fields but there were no existing members to induct newcomers. Information about what the group was intended for and how it would work had come from a formal information sheet and not from an existing tradition of practice. Participation was explicitly voluntary and so depended to a significant extent on participants swiftly perceiving personal usefulness in the group. The lifespan of the group was pre-determined by both the conditions of ethical approval and the timelines of my own candidature. There were no long-standing habits of collegiality that could override disruptions caused by external events, such as the

relocation of my department to a not quite completed building on another campus in the second part of the project. Although the facilitators of the group were both experienced in developing learning communities, they were both a long way from the campus and so had to meet the group online. As co-coordinator of the project, I was myself learning about both academic writing and the working of a learning community.

To some extent, these factors caused the fluctuating attendance, the variation in expectations and the dropouts that are reported in the participants' narratives. If I set up a learning community in the future, I would try to bring together a group with more common interests and take more time to build relationships and common understandings of how a learning community would operate. Nevertheless, even with its limitations, the project had a number of positive outcomes and highlighted a range of issues that invite further exploration. These are discussed in the pages that follow.

Participants' concerns about academic writing

As mentioned previously, I had anticipated that participants would focus on surface aspects of their academic writing as there are extensive studies, reviewed in Chapter Three, of international students' difficulties with aspects of grammar and sequential structure and there were some reports in the group of these kinds of problems (Abdulkareem, 2013; Chou, 2011; Leisak, 1989). As detailed in the preceding chapter, participants talked about difficulties with: tense; the use of passive voice; with finding appropriate synonyms; and logical order within a paragraph and chapter. They also reported uncertainty about: the use of cohesive devices; about when they needed to reference and when they could state their own opinion; about the best ways to report their words of their own research participants; about processes of translation; about the use of hedging; and about developing a scholarly voice without losing simplicity and clarity. These concerns engage with the complexities of academic language including meaning making, rigour, credibility and ethicality.

The range of reported difficulties and interests highlights the range of needs that international doctoral students face in academic writing. My university, like many others, offers a writing support service to students. Typically a student will sit with a mentor who will help edit a page or so of writing. The concerns of the participants in this study suggest that a greater variety of support would be useful. International students, and perhaps others, could benefit from classes focusing on specific features of writing, collaborative writing workshops, peer mentoring, and

detailed and strategic explanation by their supervisors of steps to improve their writing (Guerin et al., 2013; Hord, 2009; Strauss, 2001).

In addition to reporting problems, some student participants in this study talked about how much they enjoyed and valued talking about their writing intentions with experienced researchers like the facilitators. Their feedback highlights that academic writing is about ideas as much as it is about vocabulary, grammar and structure. International students often struggle with surface features of language but they see themselves, and want their peers and supervisors to see them, as doctoral researchers who are wrestling to shape and deepen their ideas. Farzaneh and Ahmad, in particular, valued the learning community because it gave them the opportunity to talk about their emergent and changing understandings with others, including more experienced researchers who could critique as well as encourage the development of their thinking. Their feedback points to the value of opportunities for doctoral students and faculty staff to meet and talk together about their research informally as well as in structured presentations (Wang & Yang, 2012).

Understanding supervisors' feedback

A number of the student participants reported that their supervisors had given them feedback on their writing, but they did not really understand what was wrong nor how they should make it better. Farzaneh reported that her supervisors had told her that her work conveyed the meaning but she needed to “work more on academic writing”. She knew she did not measure up to their expectations but she explained that she prided herself on using simple language and she was afraid that being more academic would mean her writing would not be so easily understood. Discussion in the group over several sessions helped her notice and understand that she was leaving out certain scholarly details that were important. Vida reported that her supervisor made questioning comments on her work, but she did not know what was actually expected from her. She initially felt the challenges were overwhelming. Amin’s supervisor had criticised his inconsistent use of terms as he had tried to avoid repetition by paraphrasing terms. He struggled to understand this critique until he was later explicitly told by his supervisor to keep using specific terms because they had exact meanings in his field. Vida’s supervisor rewrote her report to serve as a model for her further writing. She told the group she recognised the writing was better, but she could not identify the specific features that made it better. Majid, now working from the other end of the relationship, supervised students and struggled to give the appropriate feedback he intended to his students.

These reports by the student participants on getting feedback from their supervisors suggest that some supervisors may not be communicating as effectively with their students as they intended. The students heard that there were problems with their writing, but struggled to understand the conventions of academic writing in their fields and to find strategically effective ways of improving their writing. Arguably, the students needed more specific guidance in ways to improve their writing and needed to know how to ask for such guidance, and the supervisors needed to know how to give such guidance.

Research studies suggest that many international students come with understandings and habits of work that may not match their supervisors on every level. Students' views can be influenced by their academic and cultural background (Prior, 1995), academic values and expectations (Johns, 1997; Newman et al., 2003; Swales, 1990), and being unaware of the requirements of their writing (Casanave, 2004; Soe, 2003). The consequence of this mismatch can further result in the students losing their confidence, as their supervisors know the codes of their field, while the students are not fully aware. Supervisors are also used to established forms of communication in their academic context while the students may not be so certain about them, as in the cases of Vida and Farzaneh. Majid, albeit a novice supervisor, acknowledged he was not fully able to understand his students' needs and needed to develop better communication.

Such difficulty in communication may indicate that more time is needed in dialogue. This could allow supervisors to understand their students' needs and views and to discuss their requirements with them. Further, understanding between students and supervisors could be established that would prevent clash of ideas and help with students' confidence. As students come from a variety of backgrounds and cultures, there may be cultural and educational aspects that hinder effective communication. Perhaps departments or universities could develop strategies that support supervisors in understanding international students' needs and ways of addressing them.

Structure and flexibility

As was evident in the reported facilitators and students' narratives, there was an on-going tension between a desire for structure and appreciation of the flexibility that allowed participants to address issues that they saw as important. In feedback, many of the student participants indicated that they preferred to have more structure. The Iranian students in particular mentioned that structure would have helped them gain more. Participants like Vida, Maria, and Nima indicated that they wanted more pre-arranged structure which would have

made the sessions more like classes with a selected topic. There were others like Farzaneh and Majid who thought that the topic of the proceeding sessions should be selected in each session. On the other hand, the project had been designed to be student-centred and therefore flexible in order to respond to the problems and concerns students would raise. It is noteworthy that when the facilitators sent out a survey asking participants to indicate what they would like addressed in following sessions, only three responded. Structure, it might seem from the students' comments, was something the teacher should provide rather than something to be evolved collaboratively.

This tension is one that is perhaps to be anticipated in the early stages of an evolving learning community, especially if participants have not had previous experience of that kind of group process. In reflection, I see that both structure and flexibility have a role to play.

Flexibility allowed the real difficulties students were facing to be discussed and be addressed, while having a structure would have meant that topics may have been discussed that were not participants' real issues. Flexibility also called for participants to think about and identify their problems rather than relying on instruction. A more defined structure might have given participants a greater sense of security, and might have been a means to induct them into dialogue and discussion.

As the participants in this study and other researchers, such as Guerin et al., (2013) have pointed out, students are isolated during their PhD and many do not get opportunities to talk to each other about their ideas and problems and to learn from each other. Nevertheless, open and free-flowing communication has been identified as a foundation for enriching learning and enabling change. Noble et al. (2005) emphasised the value of open spaces that allow students to interact, develop relationships, learn more about their rights and responsibilities, gain awareness and understanding of each other, and develop a sense of belonging and of connectedness. Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) highlighted the importance of developing a communicative space in which participants could learn the cyclic methods of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting when facing issues on their own. Perhaps some participants' desire to have more structure has cultural roots. Many came from Asian countries where the method of teaching is mostly instructor centred where the instructor selects a topic and students follow. It is arguable that the previous experience of some of the participants had included little exposure to undirected learning experiences and they were habituated to follow an instructor rather than take initiative themselves. They possibly also had little experience of learning through collaboration. The

desire for structure perhaps comes from both a habituated reliance on leadership and desire to get the right answer instead of finding a meaningful answer.

With hindsight, I reflect that it might have been useful to offer participants more overt structure in the initial sessions in order to allow them to develop the confidence to talk to each other and evolve the collaboration that would allow them to be more flexible.

The value of talk

At the beginning of the study, all student participants were reserved, including myself. It was only gradually that the participants started to value talking. Those who persevered with the group reported that what they valued most was the opportunity to talk to other students and to the facilitators about their ideas and their writing; they gained insights, they said, by listening to others talk about problems they faced and understood their own issues better by articulating them. On the other hand, many of those who only attended one or two sessions signalled pressure of time as a reason for discontinuing. They needed their time, they implied, to focus on their own study.

Many of the participants talked about feeling alone in the doctoral journey and stated they valued the group because they realised others shared similar problems. However, participation in a learning community offers more than just recognition of similar problems: it offers the opportunity to talk - repeatedly - about not only the problems, but also strategies to address them. It also offers opportunities to sound out ideas, listen to questions and forge new ideas. Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) identified the development of a communicative space as the first and essential step towards collaborative exploration. Developing the confidence to talk with colleagues about ideas, problems, aspirations and limitations, they argued, opens up a capacity to think differently and act differently. Noble and Henderson (2008) reported a project in which the learning circle became a non-judgmental space in which at-risk Teacher Education students could talk freely and reflectively about their practice. Greenwood (2020) acknowledged that sharing ideas can be a new experience for some international doctoral students, but reported how the students in her learning communities came to enjoy trying ideas out, taking expressive risks and eventually arguing with her, their supervisor.

The learning community in this project provided the opportunity for participants to talk about writing instead of getting instruction. Reflecting on their own writing, sharing difficulties with others and hearing their issues, potentially allowed participants to dig deeper into their own

issues. Ahmad, for example, thought that he was going to help others but acknowledged he ended up gaining insights into his own work.

However, developing enough trust to talk openly does not emerge automatically; rather it needs to be encouraged and facilitated.

Evolving roles

The project was established with people in specific roles: facilitators to lead and guide, student participants to explore their writing problems and the researcher to record and analyse. However, it was also acknowledged that these roles were not fixed and that they would evolve. As the community developed and as participants either became more confident and engaged or dropped out, roles shifted and stretched, as is recorded in the preceding chapter.

The facilitators actively tried to move authority and leadership around the group and, at various times, student participants took leadership in discussions. The shifting currents of leadership are one of the features that distinguishes a learning community from a tutorial group. A learning community needs a leader to set it up and depends on effective facilitation to get it going, but roles within the group are not fixed and they can shift and stretch according to engagement and as confidence within the group develops. Hord (2009) noted that a learning community involves a dynamic way of learning. Glassman et al. (2013) argued that changing community interactional patterns are a means to change a goal driven activity to a more collaborative decision making process that would lead to the emergence of collective action and new possibilities. As Smith (2003) reflected, learning is not seen as an individual process, rather a social one where the learner is the centre.

The development of trust is an important factor in participants' willingness and capability of shifting roles. For many Asian students, respect for the teacher means asking for, and taking, guidance. The participants in this study enjoyed having friendly discussions with the professors but they needed time to become comfortable with questioning and even disagreeing. As the trust relationship developed, the participants took a more central role.

My own role also evolved. Kemmis (2012) stated that in the spiral process of action research, the researcher is not placed away from the research, rather inside and plays an internal role with the participants. Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) stated that in participatory action research the researcher-facilitator need not be and often cannot be neutral, because s/he is part of the process of inquiry and search for change. My evolving roles allowed me to have more criticality

and gain a deeper understanding. Further, I began to have more confidence and take ownership of the project.

The facilitators were, to a large extent, managers of the sessions, but facilitation requires cooperation with the group to understand the problems that need investigation. According to many participants, such as Farzaneh, Ahmad, Maria, Mona and Nima, the facilitators successfully made participants comfortable and created a sense of trust. They encouraged dialogue by commenting on participants' ideas, argued to provoke thinking, asked for clarification, made requests for action (not always followed), and summarised discussions. However, as discussions evolved and participants took more control, the facilitators became participants in the study. Development of relationship between the participants and facilitators gave the student participants a more central role. Alam (2020) and Greenwood (2020) variously acknowledged that a learning community potentially becomes a community of sharing needs and ideas.

Power and its movement

As described earlier, the stipulations of the Ethics Committee had alerted me to the issue of power. As the group evolved, I found the flow of power was complex. At the start, the facilitators were seen as the source of power: they guided the students and the students wanted their expertise. To some extent, they retained this role throughout, but used it to encourage others to develop their power. At the beginning, although I had brought the group together, because of my inexperience I felt unsure and powerless. Gradually and based on the needs of the study, I had to gain power to assist the online facilitators with the student participants. As the student participants became more familiar with the study, gained confidence and trusted each other, power shifted towards them. In various ways, they took power as they shared their concerns and examples of writing, when they offered suggestions and comments and particularly when they talked about their field and different applications and strategies they used.

However, there were also times when it seemed that the exercise of power was a decision to hold back: a reluctance to share specific details about problems, sometimes a preference for giving advice to others rather than sharing their own difficulties. Perhaps this might be seen as a fear of losing the power of self-protection.

When the participants started to take more initiative, the belief in their own power arguably increased. In the final stages of the project, the student participants began to consider the

possibility of a learning community without the leadership of the facilitators. One instance was Farzaneh and Mona acknowledging their willingness to continue the learning community after the study and occasionally get assistance when needed from the facilitators. They were tentatively stepping away from their previous reliance on being led by an expert and taking responsibility for their own learning.

Greenwood (2020) noted that supervisors do not have expertise in everything and that students need to take power in bringing their own knowledge and in making decisions. She argued also that a learning community encourages participants to shift from using their power to hold onto their existing beliefs and guarding their knowledge to exploring and sharing new ideas, so gaining increased potency and effectiveness. She suggested this helps them as graduates to use their knowledge to contribute to their communities, practically or in the search for new knowledge.

Foucault (2003) argued that power is exercised not simply possessed and that the existence of power is dependent on its exercise (1983). He asserted that “power is everywhere” (1978), and that it not necessarily hierarchical but is aimed to satisfy needs and objectives (1978). This study showed that every participant held some aspects of potential power and they showed their power through actions like sharing, making decisions, staying or dropping out. Although the facilitators took the initiative at first, slowly the participants gained power in sharing ideas and taking decisions.

Kemmis (2008) argued that power comes from collective commitment, and that agency is a linked to heightened understanding and motivation. A learning community thus has the potential to forge a collective confidence in creating change. In the case of this project the participants did not change in a couple of months to becoming fully accomplished writers, but those who continued their engagement did increase their understanding of both their own problems and what was expected in academic writing and their motivation to improve their skills. As they took responsibility for that improvement, they increased their power to make change.

Collaboration

As reported in individual narratives, participants joined the group with varying expectations. As researchers have noted (Astuto et al., 1993; Hord, 1997; Mitchell, 2000; Toole & Louis, 2002), for a group to become a learning community, participants need to learn to collaborate with one another.

Due to their different expectations, fields, and stages of study, an initial awkwardness developed that made it hard to find and collaborate on a common base. Many international students are used to a top-down process of learning rather than a bottom-up one. Moreover, international students learn to be competitive as in their home contexts they are given scores and ranked by place in class. Such a system does not promote collaboration and discussion among the students and they tend to proceed through their studies as solo students.

Lack of experience in collaborative learning suggests that collaboration needs to be taught. Learning to collaborate does not come easily, especially for international students who have not experienced it previously. This indicates the importance of explaining the concept when first approaching participants and developing an environment where they get to know each in the first few sessions. Developing a spirit of collaboration could help sustain participants and make them comfortable in the process. Saunders and Werner (2002) consider collaborative learning to be highly influential learning environments. As Dodge and Kendall (2004) indicated, learning collaboration in a learning community can help the students in problem solving and meeting new people, which in turn can influence their future success in personal, academic and professional fields.

Online participation

As I explained earlier, online participation and facilitation was not part of the original plan and it caused some difficulties. At the end of the study, I might have recommended avoiding it. However, the worldwide COVID-19 crisis has forced much of education to be carried out online and therefore the difficulties we faced merit some further discussion as do ways of overcoming them.

One of the problems was that the facilitators were not able to see everyone clearly through their screens, and so missed their facial and body language. The lack of face-to-face interaction with the facilitators seemed to affect the development of intimacy, which was, at least partially, remediated by their attendance in person for a couple of sessions. This highlighted the realisation that creating intimacy online takes more time.

One advantage of working online was that distance could be overcome. However, time differences remained a problem, and we found that the filtering of internet applications in some countries prevented easy communication.

Later, during the COVID-19 national lockdown, Professor Jess had weekly workshops with all her students, of which I was one. During those sessions, we became an online community. Reflecting on that experience, I felt there was as much intimacy with my supervisor and my other colleagues online as in person. This could be due to various reasons. We had all seen each other in person before and developed close relationships. Because Professor Jess was now working off campus, we had got used to supervisions online. Seeing one another's face was also helped by the fact that we were all on separate monitors, rather than having the majority in one room.

Perhaps COVID-19 will make online teaching habitual in the future. Physical distancing may mean that if we are going to create learning communities in the future, they will need to be online. Online allows participation across distance. Some programmes, like Zoom, which I used, allow recording of the sessions. These are significant advantages. However, communication is a little more formal, sometimes awkward, and the sharing of work requires advance planning to ensure it can be seen on screen by all participants at the same time as the discussion takes place. As discussed earlier, the evolution of a learning community requires the development of an environment that facilitates trust and active engagement by participants as well as opportunity for easy communication. My experience with the online elements in this group suggests that a learning community could be developed online but more time might be needed for relationships to grow and facilitators might need to develop new strategies to use the medium effectively.

Agency

An underlying notion in this study was that the taking of responsibility for understanding their writing difficulties would help students improve their academic writing. Consequently, I initially conceived agency in terms of participants actively committing to first understanding their writing problems and then to developing personal and considered strategies to improve. As their narratives have indicated, some of the participants in the group did exercise agency in those terms.

However, implicit in the concept of agency is the freedom of the individual to choose what action to take (Bandura, 2001, 2006). Within the total group, some participants decided, for various reasons, to stop coming. That could be considered as a form of agency. Some others continued coming but reported that what they considered the most useful to them in the project was the opportunity to share their ideas with experienced academics rather than a systemic

consideration of surface aspects of writing. Their development of a personal purpose in engaging with the group is also a form of agency.

In reflection, I realise that the fostering of agency within a learning community is a complex matter. On the one hand, it involves the encouragement of initiative and self-responsibility for learning. On the other, it involves allowing and respecting individuals' formulation of their own learning goals. I reflect that in developing a learning community there is a tension between the active encouragement of agency and the need to grow communal goals and active collaboration.

Participants' recommendations

The recommendations participants made about a defined structure have been discussed above. Some participants also made recommendations for ways the university could develop doctoral learning communities.

Farzaneh and Ahmad recommended that universities should be the initiator of learning communities. It was suggested that universities should utilise studies such as this one to identify the needs of students and set up groups at the same stage of study and in the same field, with opportunities for cross-group meetings to share experiences. It was proposed that the university's role would be that of provider and enabler: it would provide place, time, and notify students. However, it was proposed that the university would not interfere in the direction of the learning community and students would make decisions and evaluate the outcome. The university's role would be to facilitate and help the students make final decisions through facilitators. It was further recommended that these learning communities should be available for students at the early stages of students' study, when they have more time and are under less pressure, but feel the need. It was suggested that the programmes of such communities should be a blend of top-down guidance and bottom-up identification of needs and exploration of strategies.

I reflect that these suggestions acknowledge the value of learning communities, but they present some logistical problems. I noted that most of my participants joined the group in order to support a colleague's research study. Would enough doctoral students join the range of voluntary groups that it was recommended the university should set up? Would the university fund the facilitators' time? And if it did, would it prefer to evaluate outcomes itself rather than pass the responsibility for direction over to students, particularly if they were in the early stages of study? This study showed that most participants initially struggled to understand the concept

of learning community. Would international students with backgrounds that expect direction from teachers opt for tutorial courses?

The suggestion of developing a number of small learning communities for students at different stages and fields would not only increase costs and present institutional challenges for tracking, but may not really serve the needs of participating students. Students at the same stage of study may, in fact, have very different needs and arguably, students who are at advanced stages of their research may benefit from interaction with beginners as well as being able to contribute.

Nevertheless, the baseline recommendation, that learning communities should be provided for students, is an important outcome of this study. Perhaps initiative for such communities would best be taken at departmental or even supervisor level, where students and academic staff already know each other to some extent and where it might be easier to develop an environment that facilitates communication and encourages commitment.

A return to my research question

My research project is a case study addressing the more open-ended question: How can a learning community help international doctoral students to exercise agency and utilise peer support in order to identify their academic writing difficulties and develop strategies to overcome them?

In terms of my actual case study, I acknowledge a mixed result in terms of the key components of the question. Although I have argued that all the participants in the study exercised some kind of agency, only some utilised agency to regularly engage with the group and to improve their academic writing. The extent to which participants offered and utilised peer support varied considerably as the individual narratives show. However, it is noteworthy that many of the participants talked about what they learned both through discussing other people's difficulties and through receiving feedback on their own ones. Furthermore, it turned out that while many of the sessions did focus on specific questions about and problems with academic writing, what the participants who remained to the end of the project seemed to value most was the opportunity to talk with experienced academics about the challenge of translating their ideas into writing.

I think some of this mixed result is due to the fact that I am an emergent researcher who learned more about the implications of my project as I conducted it. Next time, I would be more able

to tell prospective participants what to expect and to better shape the opening sessions to encourage engagement and discussion.

Nevertheless, I would argue that the case study highlights both needs and possibilities. As the earlier discussion in this chapter has indicated the participants in this study, perhaps like other international students, were aware that their writing did not measure up to their supervisors' expectations, but were not always aware of what the actual problems were or how they could remedy them. Talking in the group enabled them to explore the problems and what they could do about them. The sharing of writing and the sharing of analyses and advice helped participants to consider particulars in their writing. Further, it seems that the opportunity to talk with experienced academic writers about writing increased participants' confidence in themselves as evolving academic writers.

The earlier discussion in this chapter highlights factors that would impact on the effectiveness of a learning community. Each of these factors, I argue, constitutes part of an answer to the *how* in my research question. A convened group is not a ready-made learning community; such a community evolves and its potential for collaborative learning depends on how each of these factors is navigated in practice.

It also needs to be acknowledged that a learning community is only one of a range of supports that can help international doctoral students improve their academic writing: classes, seminars, one-to-one mentoring are among others. What a learning community offers is flexibility to respond to participants' evolving needs and the opportunity for collaborative exploration and learning.

Recommendations

Drawing on the preceding discussion, I make the following recommendations for universities departments, supervisors, doctoral students and researchers respectively.

For universities:

- Provide a range of support structures to help international doctoral students develop their academic writing, including classes, tutorials, mentoring centres and the opportunity to join collaborative learning groups.
- Provide professional development for doctoral supervisors to help them understand their international students' cultural learning backgrounds and academic writing needs.

For departments:

- Provide a range of opportunities for doctoral students to mix with academic staff and share ideas about their research and their writing.
- Provide physical space and interactive occasions for students to talk about their writing as well as existing opportunities to share their research progress and findings.
- Encourage and support supervisors to develop learning communities with their doctoral students.

For supervisors:

- Become aware that international students may be reluctant to question critical comments about their writing and that may mask their lack of understanding of what is expected.
- Provide strategically selective feedback to students on errors in their writing so they are not overwhelmed and can work on small and specific improvements at a time.
- Develop a learning community with students, perhaps combining with a colleague and their students.

For doctoral students:

- Take time to talk to others doing research.
- Be prepared to surrender some of your self-protection and competitiveness and share ideas, problems and small samples of your writing with other students.
- Identify a few specifics you want to work on to improve writing, and make sure you improve those before selecting a new set of specifics.
- Do not be afraid to ask advice and share: you do not have to be alone.

For researchers:

- Research the workings of already operational learning communities, perhaps using a phenomenological or reflective practice approach.

Future work

While specific projects, like this one, finish, the cycles of action research do not always stop. In various ways the process of reflecting, re-planning and taking new action may continue. Farzaneh, for example, has already sent out an invitation for others to join her in a new community to improve their writing. I am still thinking about ways I could better organise another project like this one. Some of those ways have been addressed in this chapter.

I am also thinking about further learning I want to do. One area is that of facilitation: in the future I would like to facilitate a learning community myself. Another area is learning more about the processes of switching languages and, prompted by Angie's comment about a block, about difficulties that may be experienced in struggling for a satisfying competency in a second language. I also want to learn more about learning itself. I realise I came to this project with simplistic ideas about learning that were challenged by the comments of some of the students and by the facilitators. I have recorded some of my resulting reflections throughout this thesis.

Looking back on the quantitative approach that dominated my previous academic study, I would like to explore whether there are aspects of the process and the outcomes of learning communities that could be usefully measured quantitatively, without negating their evolving nature and without negating the value of the varying experiences and perceptions that each participant has.

In the last year, I have been working part-time in a secondary school and would like to develop this into the next stage of my career. I want to explore ways of bringing aspects of learning community into my classroom. I would also like to develop a cross- school learning community for immigrant students to support both their academic and social learning. And perhaps one for their parents.

These plans are all still in the reflecting and planning stage. I hope to turn them into action.

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Appendix

HUMAN ETHICS COMMITTEE

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Email: human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz

Ref: 2018/15/ERHEC

30 May 2018

Sayed Mirhossein Hosseini Pozveh

School of Teacher Education

UNIVERSITY OF CANTERBURY

Dear Sayed

Thank you for providing the revised documents in support of your application to the Educational Research Human Ethics Committee. I am very pleased to inform you that your research proposal “Improving Academic Writing: Self-Efficacy and Collaborative Learning” has been granted ethical approval.

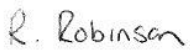
Please note that this approval is subject to the incorporation of the amendments you have provided in your emails of 10th and 28th May 2018.

Should circumstances relevant to this current application change you are required to reapply for ethical approval.

If you have any questions regarding this approval, please let me know.

We wish you well for your research.

Yours sincerely

pp 

Dr Patrick Shepherd

Chair

Educational Research Human Ethics Committee